VALERIE AYLMER.

A NOVEL.

BY

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A woman's will dies hard,
In the hall, or on the sward.
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VALERIE AYLMER.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

STRIKING THE FLAG.

"READ that, Valerie!" said General Aylmer, as he strode hastily to his daughter's side, and tossed an open letter into her lap.

Now, being a man little addicted to choleric impulses, the passionate tone in which he spoke—the very act itself—were so different from his usual voice and manner, that the girl whom he addressed started perceptibly. Then, instead of touching the letter, she looked up with evident astonishment into his face.

"Why, papa!" she said, after an instant—and her tone of surprise spoke volumes for her father's usual amiability—"what can the matter be? Nothing about Eugene, I hope?" she added, anxiously.

"No—nothing about Eugene."

"Something about the New-Orleans business, then?"

"No; certainly not."

"Then what—?"

"Suppose you read the letter!" interrupted her father, with an impatient acerbity altogether new to him. And as she proceeded to obey a suggestion, the tone of which made it a command, he turned from her, and began to walk restlessly up and down the long piazza, with a very flushed and angry countenance.

It was plain that something of more than ordinary importance had gone wrong with the general; since, under ordinary, and even extraordinary misfortunes, his philosophy was invariably that of the Stoic, with a strong dash of the Epicurean. "Grieving over a loss never yet helped a man to bear it," the general was wont to say; and few people ever reduced theory to more perfect practice. *Che sarà, sarà* had been his life-long motto; resignation, strongly tinctured with indifference, his life-long mode of meeting danger or difficulty; and this debonair creed had borne him lightly and scathlessly through many a peril, and over many a misfortune which would utterly have wrecked ordinary men. There had been more than enough of these perils and misfortunes in their time, yet they had scarcely marked a line on his frank, handsome face, or tempered by a shade his genial, pleasant manner. So, it followed that in all the gay and hospitable country-side of St. Stephen's Parish, Louisiana, no man was more popular, or more deserving of popularity, than General Aylmer of Aylmers. No man understood half so well the art of pleasing all men—and all women, too—with hardly an effort beyond that of the will; no man better united knowledge of the world with the *bonhomie* of his open-handed, open-hearted race; no man lived faster, and yet few men ever suffered less in the opinion of society. Indeed, he was one of the exceptional people who seem born to rule opinion instead of being ruled by it—though why this was so, it would be hard to say. The sources of power are almost always mysterious, and if we attempted to analyze them—which Heaven forbid we should do!—we

should be apt to find ourselves sadly at a loss to account for many elevations to greatness, social or otherwise, unless we accept as a solution the plausible theory of a special ruling faculty. If there be such a thing, General Aylmer undoubtedly possessed it in singular degree. It had made him a man of mark and influence all his life; it had rendered him foremost in every enterprise in which he engaged, from his college escapades and early social triumphs, to the political successes and military renown of later life; and yet, in what it consisted, his nearest friend could not have told. "He had a wonderful way with him," they all said; and there they stopped. The secret of his fascination seemed as subtle as the charm of his hospitality—a hospitality which had been quite famous during the *ancien régime*, and still held its own bravely, even under the changed aspect of affairs. For affairs had changed very much in the year eighteen hundred and sixty-five, when our story opens; and General Aylmer, like the rest of his class and generation, had paid, in subjection to wholesale robbery, the penalty of being a gentleman by birth, and an aristocrat by position. Yet it chanced that Fortune had been a degree kinder to him than to many of his compeers. After that terrible end—that end full of bitterness and degradation unutterable!—which came with the early roses of the fair Southern April, he returned to the home from which for four long years he had been an exile, and found that this home had fared somewhat better than he had dared either to hope or expect. Defaced and injured it was, undoubtedly, but in less degree than most of the habitations near at hand, and certainly not irreparably, since, in a short time, something of the old beauty began to appear again—something of Eden to bloom once more out of Sahara. The general was not a man to sit down in useless repining, and still less was he a man to tolerate, even for a day, the least discomfort which effort could remove. So, the plundered rooms were refurnished; the empty stables and cellars at least moderately refilled; the trampled shrubberies trained into order; the barren fields put under cultivation; the great doors thrown open in their hospitable welcome, and the old tide of life bid to flow back again.

In view of these facts, it was not singular that St. Stephen's Parish returned quickly enough to its old allegiance—swearing as cordially by the general's wine and the general's horses as it had ever done in the past. And yet it was not singular, either, that, once safely out of the domain of Aylmers, the parish did not hesitate to shrug its shoulders, and ask very injuredly, how the deuce he managed it. He was a man whose apparent sources of wealth were no greater than those of his neighbors; but, while they were daily forced into closer retrenchment, he had resumed a mode of life which bordered closely on extravagance. It was very pleasant, of course, to know that one house at least was yet open, where a capital dinner and a good mount were always ready for a friend, where the best of Hochheimer and the best of cigars were things at command, and the brightest of eyes smiled a welcome; but still that did not solve the puzzle as to how he managed it; and this rendered the pleasure something of a discomfort also. "To be sure, it is none of my business," everybody said; but then everybody felt that he or she would very much like to know. True, the general was the lucky possessor of a rich father-in-law, to whose fortune his daughter was sole heiress; but this father-in-law, so far from being an old man, likely to step off the scene at any moment, was a man of little more than middle-age, who, not long before, had taken unto himself a new wife, and apparently a new lease of life; so his existence was scarcely to be assumed a solution of the enigma. Then, although Gerald Aylmer was the most "steady" of young men, and really an excellent planter, there was Eugene, the handsome scapegrace, whose dissipation and recklessness were known to all the parish, and who had gone to Europe immediately after the close of the war, where of course he was spending any amount of money. While, as for Valerie—but the extravagance of General Aylmer's only daughter had been known to her friends and neighbors so long that they had ceased to marvel over any fresh manifesta-

tion of it, and indeed considered it rather a commendable quality in the presumptive heiress and beauty-regnant, who was chief among the charms of Aylmers. For other men might possess horses as good, and wine as unexceptionable, but no other man could possibly boast, as head of his household, the loveliest girl of the Mississippi Valley, the queen of a hundred loyal hearts, the toast of a hundred gallant lips, from the Potomac to the Rio Grande.

All of these things, Valerie Aylmer made good her claim to be esteemed, and yet her head was not absolutely giddy—a fact which in itself entitles her to respectful consideration. She had been a beauty and an heiress from her cradle; she was clever enough to hold her own in any fair intellectual tilt without falling under the terrible odium of being blue; and she was, besides, thorough mistress of all the thousand fascinations which some exceptional women possess, and which are more charming than the beauty of Helen, or the dower of a princess; and yet, if it is impossible to say that she was quite unspoiled (for that would be saying she was an angel, and no woman at all), it is at least possible to say that the spoiling had not done her much harm. It had made her wilful and daring, and fond of her power, perhaps; but it had not darkened over the sweet, frank charm of her girlhood with even so much as a shade of that intense self-appreciation, that offensive vanity, and more offensive affectation, which make bellehood a thing to be dreaded rather than desired for any girl. "A shameful coquette," people called Miss Aylmer; but they said it half in jest; and never a man or woman of them all loved her the less for her gay flirtations. She amused herself with the admiration offered her, and broke hearts, as it is called, by the dozen; but it was so much as a child accepts sugar-plums and demolishes playthings, that even the very victims would not have had the heart to deny her the enjoyment. "It is so pleasant to be pretty and to be admired," she said once to an intimate friend; and the sentence embodied her whole opinion on the subject. It was so pleasant to feel that, whoever looked on her, desired to look again—so pleasant to know that, go where she would, she carried a talisman, potent ever to win kindness and service—so pleasant that men strove with each other which of them should do most to gain even such a trifling favor as her hand for a dance—so pleasant that the roses of life and love were all scattered, as it were, under her very feet! She exulted in it, and enjoyed it, with the full, glad exultation, the keen, fresh enjoyment of youth, when youth has known few troubles. And her troubles had been very few; for even the war, with its attendant horrors, had fallen lightly on her head. She had seen havoc and death around, but it had not been brought home to her, since her father and brothers came safely through the baptism of blood. She had been exiled from her birthplace, but she had roughed it very gayly in camps and beleaguered cities, shedding the glory of her youth and beauty wherever she went. Considering her many attractions, it was scarcely wonderful that her fame spread far and wide, or that few women of her day and generation counted more loyal subjects. Yet her beauty was only the beauty of her countrywomen intensified to superlative degree—only the graceful features, the pearly complexion, the soft, dark eyes, and silken-dark hair, which we meet in every wayside village, from Maryland to Mexico, making a type of loveliness that is to be found under no other sky. Of all of these personal gifts, Miss Aylmer possessed a trifle more than her due share, together with something which rendered them specially and entirely her own. It is very hard to draw the exact line where prettiness—which is so common—ends, and where beauty—which is so rare—begins. And the effort to do so is not made more easy by the fact that a great many people never draw such a line at all; never trouble themselves to remember that there is any higher standard than that of their own individual taste; or that a face which seems to them all loveliness may, without losing a tittle of this loveliness, fall outside the magic circle of beauty, because its tints lack harmony or its features fail in proportion. Yet, nevertheless, there are certain plain rules of art, which, if we choose to call them in, settle the matter

very summarily. One of these rules—the most absolute, perhaps, among them—declares that perfection of physical beauty consists, above all things, in finish of detail; and, judged by this test, Valerie Aylmer's beauty was perfect. From head to foot she was without a flaw, and in her own style (of course it was a matter of taste whether or not one admired that style) quite faultless.

She was tall—taller than the medium height of her sex—but with nothing whatever "grand" or Amazonian about her. On the contrary, her figure, which was exquisitely proportioned and rounded, had a charming womanliness all its own, and was daintily slender—though straight as a palm, and flexile as a water-lily. From the small neck, down to the shapely feet, there was not an angular line about her, not a curve which was not the curve of beauty, or on which an artist's eye would not have delighted to rest. Consequent upon this, she possessed that gift which is even more rare than beauty—superlative grace. One could not imagine her doing an awkward thing. In all her moods—and they were many—in all her alternations of bearing and manner, she never lost this distinction; and was charming always, principally because she was graceful always. Her face was *brune*, possessing a complexion clear enough to show every pulsation of the blood beneath, and smooth as a camellia petal—a complexion that lay like ivory on the brow and temples, but seemed charged with a flush of rosy color, covered, as it were, with a sort of roseate veil, on the lower part of the face. It is not often that such a complexion is seen; and the difficulty of finding is only equalled by the difficulty of describing it. It is more brunette than blond, for its tints are all rich and warm; but it is absolutely neither—it is something between the two, and more beautiful than either. When the flush deepened on Valerie's face, she was positively dazzling, for it was as vivid and clear as the hue of the pomegranate; but, even in her hours of lassitude, she was never wholly without color—only then it pervaded the skin like the delicate pink that lines a sea-shell. Her eyes were large and dark and lustrous; magnificent eyes, all flooding over with sunny lights and soft languors—eyes that would have lifted into the splendor of beauty the plainest face alive. The brow above them was very fine and pure of outline; exquisitely finished about the setting of the eyes, and, where the slender, dark line of the eyebrows ran, broad, somewhat square, and framed in abundant masses of rich, dark hair. Her nose gave all the distinction to the face which it is in the power of a feature of perfect symmetry to bestow. It was Greek, as far as a nose perfectly straight in itself, yet not straight from the brow, can be held to appertain to the Greek type; and about the delicate, arched nostril there was a look of pride, only redeemed by the sweetness of the mouth, whose crimson lips made a Cupid's bow beneath it. Looking at Miss Aylmer, it was impossible not to perceive the physical traces of French blood, and in listening to her voice, or watching her manner, you caught many a token in which, even through the lapse of two generations, fair Provence claimed her child. There was all the gift of ready wit and fancy, the saucy *verve* and soft *tendresse*, which appertain to the women of France above all other women, and which had already ensnared more willing captives than even the light of her lustrous eyes.

Those eyes looked up at her father now with something more than surprise in their depths—a shadow of unusual gravity was gathering in them.

"I am afraid this decision is very disappointing to you, papa," she said.

"Disappointing!" cried General Aylmer, almost fiercely. "It is—" He stopped and swallowed the remainder of his sentence—not without a considerable gulp.

"It does seem hard—when grandpapa has always taught us to regard his fortune as our own. But then, I suppose, we ought to remember that he has a right to dispose as he pleases of his own property; and—"

"A man has no right to sacrifice his positive duties to Quixotic sentiment," interrupted her father, impatiently. "In disinheriting his rightful heirs, to endow a stranger with his wealth, he is guilty of nothing less than fraud!"

"But he did not disinherit mamma," said Valerie, simply.

"What else is he virtually doing now? Her marriage-portion was a mere *bagatelle* compared to the magnificent fortune which he is about to will away from her representatives."

"But this boy—our cousin—does not his claim seem to be at least equal to ours?"

"Equal to ours!" repeated the general, too angry to be quite as punctilious as usual in the *proprieties* of conversation—"why, he is only M. Vacquant's nephew, and you are the daughter of his only child. And even the claim of relationship itself was forfeited by the conduct of his mother, who married some fortune-hunting adventurer—an Irish painter, I believe—in open opposition to the wishes of her brother. Why your grandfather should suddenly have taken up her son in this manner, is beyond my comprehension."

"He was in our army, was he not?"

"Yes—but what has that to do with it?"

Miss Aylmer's glance fell on the open page of the letter again, some part of which seemed to attract her attention; for, after a pause, she said:

"Grandpapa seems to feel great remorse for his treatment of his sister."

"He is late in manifesting it," said General Aylmer, with a sneer. "She has been dead nearly thirty years."

"Ah! So long? Then this nephew of grandpapa's must be quite old."

"Old enough to be a very clever schemer, I should say; or he could not have succeeded, as he has done, in ingratiating himself into the confidence of your grandfather, who is not a fool; or, perhaps I ought to say, *was* not a fool when I saw him last. He may be in his dotage now. Certainly his conduct justifies such a suspicion," he added bitterly.

"It is very provoking," said Valerie, thoughtfully. "I don't wonder you are vexed, papa. But it is some consolation, is it not, that we don't need this money very much? I have often congratulated myself that we are not so poor as most of our friends—for poverty is dreadful!—and I rejoice still more now that this is so—for your sake, papa. You are not fit to be a poor man. But we are not poor—comparatively speaking," she went on—"and so we ought to be resigned, even if grandpapa does not give us his money. We can do without it."

"Do you know what doing without it means?" said her father, in a tone so altered from the merely impatient and irritated one in which he had before spoken, that she looked up with a startled expression of face.

"It means ruin—that is all!—irretrievable ruin," he responded, in answer to the look.

He had been standing beside her as they talked, leaning against the pillar nearest the steps on which she sat; but now he resumed his restless promenade of the piazza, while she remained as he had left her, but very still—the hand which had been toying idly with the silver bells decorating the collar of a little spaniel, that was crouched at her side, now rested motionless on Sprite's silken coat, and her large eyes were full of a newly-awakened surprise and consternation.

After a few turns, General Aylmer paused, and took up the thread of conversation where he had dropped it. "Yes—ruin!" he said, gloomily. "You think I have suffered less in fortune than most of our friends. You are mistaken. I have not thought it necessary to retrench in my style of living, as they have done, because I naturally looked to the fortune you would inherit as security against any difficulty about the debt I have been incurring. Failing this inheritance, I have no means of meeting my liabilities, excepting by the sale of my landed estate; and, if I decided to sacrifice that to-morrow, I should only be beggaring myself, without materially benefiting my creditors. I suppose Eugene shares your own delusion on the subject of my fortune, for he is as recklessly extravagant as ever; seems to consider himself still the son of the rich man I was; and the demands he has made on me, since he has been in Europe, have contributed in no slight degree to involve me so deeply, that if I sold every acre of land I

possess—even the very soil around"—he waved his hand toward the prospect before them—"the very roof that shelters us—I should not, at the present nominal prices of property, realize half the amount of my indebtedness."

Valerie's eye had followed the motion of his hand as he was speaking, and still dwelt with wistful sadness on the familiar scene, which was now enwrapped in the soft October gloaming. Many of the marks of wanton destruction, so painfully apparent by daylight, were concealed by this kindly veil; and something of its old serene beauty was in the scene. The rich sweep of emerald lawn (emerald now, although, not twelve months back, squadrons had charged, and men had bled and died there!) —the stately trees, whose tops rustled above the roof beneath which her eyes had first seen the light, as her mother's closed to it forever —the winding depths of shrubbery—the luxuriant garden all overgrown with wild beauty—the swelling fields that, alternating with woodlands, stretched as far as the eye could reach—and, on the other side, the rushing flood of the mighty Father of Waters!

When she looked again toward her father, her eyes were swimming in tears.

"Oh, papa!" she cried, with mingled reproach and distress, "why did you not tell Eugene all this long ago? Why did you not tell both of us?—for I, too, have been very extravagant! If you had only told us, we should, like every one else, have learned economy."

"Hum!" said the general, incredulously, "it is very easy to talk of economy. Practising it is a different thing—as you will soon find, if you make the trial. It would be economy, for instance, not to order an expensive new dress for Mrs. Hautaine's party next week—but—ha!" he gave a short, sarcastic laugh, as his daughter's face changed perceptibly at the latter part of his sentence—"there—you see now that theory and practice are by no means the same."

It was true that Valerie's face had fallen when the matter was brought thus directly and feelingly home to her. She looked very blank, indeed, for an instant; but then she rallied—and the light laugh of amusement that burst from her lips contrasted strangely with her father's cynical mirth of the moment before.

"It is not pleasant to practise economy, I admit," she said, becoming serious again. "We had enough of it during the war. But it can be done. You shall see, papa, that I can do it! Not only will I dispense with a new toilet for Mrs. Hautaine's party, but I will not order a single new dress this season. I can do very well with what I—"

"My dear, you are talking nonsense," interposed her father, coldly.

"Why so, papa? You think I am incapable of acquiring the art of economy: I want to convince you to the contrary. I have been very thoughtless, very inconsiderate—even selfish, I fear—not to have remembered that it was impossible you should not have some difficulty about money at such a time as this. Now, that I am aware—why, papa, what is the matter? What have I said to displease you?"

The question was a pertinent one. General Aylmer was looking very much displeased, and also not a little embarrassed.

"You are talking nonsense, as I told you a minute ago. Like a woman—or like a child, rather—to the utter disregard of all common-sense. Keep to the subject under discussion, if you please. The question is not of future economy, but of impending ruin."

Her attempts at consolation having been so ill received thus far, Valerie did not at first hazard a response, but waited for her father to proceed. This he did not seem inclined to do; and, after a silence of some minutes, it was she who spoke again.

"Surely," she said, a little hesitatingly —"surely grandpapa does not mean to leave the whole of his fortune to his nephew. I should think he would give us something, papa—enough to pay this debt, perhaps."

General Aylmer drew a deep breath—a sigh of relief, Valerie thought, at the prospect suggested by her remark. Yet he answered, dryly enough:

"Do not flatter yourself with any such expectation. I see but one way out of the difficulty—and that, I am afraid, you will not be sensible enough to adopt."

"I! Does it depend on me?"

"Entirely."

"Then, you know, papa, that I would do any thing possible to relieve you from this burden. What is required of me?"

"Did you not read that letter?"

"Yes—part of it, that is. The first page."

"Read the remainder," said General Aylmer, and, for the third time, he returned to his sentinel-like walk.

Miss Aylmer endeavored to obey; but the twilight had deepened since her last attempt. She held the paper close before her face for several minutes, but finally shook her head, and suffered her hand to drop upon her knee, as she said: "It is too dark to decipher these hieroglyphics. Cannot you tell me what it is, papa?"

"Your grandfather, Frenchman-like, suggests that what he calls the conflicting claims of yourself and this nephew he has taken up, may be reconciled in the most satisfactory manner, by a family arrangement—that is, alliance. He has already been urging you to spend the winter in Baltimore, you know, and he now presses his request still more earnestly. This—what is the man's name?—this Darcy, is to be there; and M. Vacquant is sure that, with the opportunity of familiar association, which a residence in the same house would afford, you could not fail to be mutually attracted etc., etc."

General Aylmer spoke with sneering sarcasm. Nevertheless, he waited anxiously to hear what his daughter would say to a proposal which *might* amuse, but which, he feared, would more probably excite her anger.

"Well," he said, as she did not speak, "what do you think of this fine proposal of your grandfather's?"

"That, if it came from any one else, I should resent it as an insult," she replied, in a tone so chilling that her father frowned—for he understood perfectly the nature with which he had to deal, and this did not look promising.

"Fiddlesticks!" he said, impatiently. "The idea of your marrying this Irishman is quite absurd, I grant—but you can let your grandfather make that discovery himself in due time. What he asks of you now is not a consent to the proposed 'alliance,' but merely that you will go to Baltimore and pay him a visit."

She turned passionately.

"Go to Baltimore! That is, accede to this insulting—yes, insulting proposal, to place myself on exhibition before—papa, you surely are not serious! You surely do not wish me to compromise my own dignity and yours, by doing such a thing!"

"I thought I said, distinctly, that the proposal itself is absurd," answered the general, coldly. "It is, however, preposterous to take the view you are adopting. Your grandfather means well; and I am surprised," he went on, gravely, "that you, who pique yourself on your French blood, should be so much opposed to the most ordinary of French customs. You are as inconsistent as the rest of your sex, I perceive."

"I never professed to fancy *mariages de convenance*, sir—and I am sure I never intended to make one."

"Who is talking of *mariages de convenance?* Not your grandfather, certainly. He asks you to come and see if you can like this adventurer well enough to marry him; and I ask you—to temporize."

"That is what you always say, papa."

"I could not say any thing better in eleven cases out of twelve. Now, listen to me: you will do as you please, for I have no intention of placing a single fetter on your freedom of action. But if you do what is wise, you will go to Baltimore. Long absence has weakened your influence over your grandfather; and it is desirable that this influence should be recovered at once, by personal intercourse. Is there any harm in looking after your own interest in this way?'

"There is the harm that it would make me feel like a scheming *intrigante*."

The general shrugged his shoulders scornfully. Such scruples and niceties seemed to him, as to most worldly-wise people, so absurd that he could scarcely believe in their sincerity.

"You are very foolish, then—that is all!" he said, shortly. "The truth of the matter lies just the other way—for you would be going to protect your rights

against the schemes of another person. However, it is not worth while to argue the question. As I said before, you may go or not, as you choose. It is not likely that much depends on it for yourself. There *is* a little wealth still left in our country here; and, with a word, you can marry the best fortune afloat. The rest of us—but that does not matter."

The girl looked up quickly.

"It is all that does matter," she said. "What about the rest of you?"

"I thought I told you, a moment ago, that ruin is staring us in the face."

"And I could prevent it?"

"Your grandfather's fortune could prevent it, certainly."

Valerie looked away again, absent and troubled. This last appeal had been quite a master-stroke of policy, and proved how well General Aylmer knew his daughter's character — a character that, with many faults, both natural and acquired, had yet enough of the heroic element to respond at once to that key-note of all noble natures, generosity. When she turned round again, it was quite abruptly.

"Papa" (a great gulp)—"papa—I will go to Baltimore."

The general started. He had expected the concession, but not so soon, or with so little trouble.

"You will go to Baltimore?" he repeated, as if he did not quite trust the evidence of his own hearing.

"Yes," said Valerie, swallowing something in her throat, and speaking hastily but firmly, "I will go to Baltimore. But you know, of course, that I don't mean any thing of this—this sort"—she touched the letter. "I will go because you assure me that I can do good by going. But if grandpapa thinks that I entertain for a moment the proposal he has made, you must undeceive him."

"But hold a moment! If you go, you must make up your mind not to irritate him by injudicious opposition to his scheme; but simply to suffer matters to take their course."

"He must be told that I cannot consent to it."

"Yes—but not told in an offensive manner. Leave that to me; and do you avoid the subject as entirely as possible. Mind, I don't counsel any thing like deception—only reticence."

"Reticence is deception sometimes, papa."

The general shrugged his shoulders again. He always did shrug them over moralities of this kind.

"You have yet to learn that there is no wiser maxim in the world than *Quieta non movere*," he said. "You are young, however. You will learn it in time, if you are sensible. Meanwhile, I consider the fact of the visit settled; and I am glad to be able to—"

"Don't praise or thank me, please," said his daughter, who seemed to know what was coming. She rose hastily from her seat, and descended the steps—then paused a moment, with her foot on the lower one, and turned to speak.

"Excuse my having interrupted you, papa, but I don't feel as if I deserved either praise or thanks. I make this sacrifice so unwillingly, that it cannot be counted to my credit. I hate it bitterly, and I am no more reconciled to the necessity now than when you spoke first. I tell you this, that you may perhaps overlook the ungracious manner in which it has been done."

With the last words, and before her father had time to reply, she gave her pretty musical whistle for Sprite, and, attended by this satellite, walked away across the lawn. General Aylmer stood watching her, until the misty outline of her white dress vanished in the soft purple dusk. Then he turned and entered the house, whistling softly to himself, in a way he had when he was particularly well pleased.

CHAPTER II.

A SON OF NEPTUNE.

As for Miss Aylmer, she bore away with her into the sweet gloaming as restless and disquieted a heart as it has often pleased our poor humanity to render itself uncom-

fortable with. In all her life, she had rarely, if ever, felt more angrily stirred than by the scene just passed—rarely, if ever, been called upon to place so great a constraint upon her own wishes and inclinations as she had just agreed to do. And, as she told her father, she did not accept the necessity at all gracefully; indeed, she rebelled against it with all her might, even while she voluntarily bent her neck to endure it. Sacrifice, and the denial of her own will, were very new to her, and not at all pleasant. But still more new, still less pleasant, was the sense of positive insult tingling in every vein, as she realized the proposal her grandfather had made, and set her teeth and clinched her hands over it. "That he should think I would do such a thing!" she thought—and she was so indignant, that she felt her pulses beating with a rush, as she thought it. The longer she considered the proposition, the more inexcusable it seemed, and the more she felt inclined to regret having struck her flag even as far as was implied in the consent to go to Baltimore. She was so strongly tempted to rescind this resolution, that it required a very earnest consideration of all her father had told her, concerning his pecuniary difficulties, before she could entirely put aside the temptation, and resign herself to the inevitable. "If I must, I must," she said, half aloud—and then she stopped short, for she found that she had walked much faster, and much farther, than she intended, and had reached the extremity of the grounds on that side.

She stopped, and, as she stopped, she looked around. She had been so entirely occupied with indignant thoughts, that she had not noticed how much the dusk had deepened, or that one by one the silver stars had gleamed into sight. The atmosphere was heavy with fragrance, for an arbor covered by luxuriant creepers stood near; and where the shrubbery ended, and the outside domain began, there ran a hedge of orange and laurel; the air was so exquisitely clear, that, even through the shades of evening, the fair picture of level fields, and distant, shadowy woodlands, was yet distinctly visible; and the low, far-off coo of the wood-pigeon was the only sound that broke the absolute stillness. A scene more suggestive of repose could scarcely be conceived, and it was not without effect on the girl who gazed. She stood for some time where she had paused first, quite motionless, with the flush gradually fading from her face, and the excitement dying down in her breast. She began to feel ashamed to remember how angry she had been—and all for what now seemed a very trifling cause! There was something of sanctuary quiet, something of sanctuary awe, in the subdued beauty, the deep, serene pathos—for when Nature is peaceful, she is always pathetic—of this twilight hour; and there came over her that hush of rest which only the sanctuary or Nature can bestow. She raised her face to the deep, steel-blue of the heavens, that looked down with glittering eyes upon her, and it seemed to shed peace, like a soft dew—peace that fell on her with the same subtle influence which had already touched the trees and the flowers, the broad plains, and the deep, shadowy woods, toning her spirit into unison with their repose. She was a girl not much habituated to serious moods—a girl who, at this period of her life, lived rather on the froth than in the depths of her own nature—but, just now, a serious mood fell on her, before she was well aware of what was coming. She sat down in the door of the arbor, and Sprite nestled close to her side, laying his little silken head on her knee, as the twilight gathered deeper and deeper, wrapping them about, like a mantle.

They had remained there for some time, and this friendly mantle concealed them effectually, when, after a while, there came a strain of music—very sweet music, for a mellow whistle was executing deftly "Within a Mile of Edinboro' Town"—the click of a latch, as a gate set in the hedge swung back, and a crisp, ringing tread on the gravel-path. Through the dusk, the single, burning eye of a cigar glowed vividly into sight, and an odor of unexceptionally fragrant smoke came floating over the young lady, who drew back as if she desired to remained undiscovered. If such were the case, she reckoned without her host, how-

ever, for Sprite, as it chanced, was of another mind. He gave a low growl, which changed suddenly into a whine of recognition; and, before his mistress could interfere, had rushed forward, and was springing up on the approaching figure.

"Why, Sprite!" exclaimed a frank voice, "is it possible that this is you?—are you out here by yourself, this time of night, you little rascal? I wonder what your mistress will say to you, sir? I should not be surprised if she was— Why, where the deuce are you off to? Sprite! Here, sir!"

Sprite, who had rushed back to Valerie, now rushed forward again, and was captured for his pains. He set up a cry of piteous lamentation, as he was tucked under his captor's arm, and this brought his mistress out of her retreat.

"Stop, Charley!" she cried, with a laugh. "Sprite is not out by himself—I am here. Put him down, please. I am afraid you are hurting him."

"I am not hurting him in the least," said the same voice that had spoken first—but Sprite felt himself swung to the ground, nevertheless. "He is howling, like a spoiled child, purely by way of amusement. I was going to take him to you, as a sort of treasure-trove," he went on, approaching the young lady, who had paused on the arbor-steps.

"Thank you—but you see it is not necessary. He has not been lost."

"Can his mistress say the same of herself?"

"What do you mean?"

"Only that you must surely have been lost or belated, or something of the kind, to be found in such a place as this, at such an hour."

"What is the matter with the place?"

"It is very lonely."

"And with the hour."

"It is very late."

"And what then?"

"Well—nothing, then, excepting that I wonder you are not afraid."

"Afraid of what? Ghosts, snakes, or wandering sailors?"

"Not the last, certainly," said the invisible gentleman, who loomed up, in the starlit dusk, like a dark, indistinct outline—his burning eye, that is, the cigar, having been thrown away when he heard Miss Aylmer's voice—"not the last, certainly; for the cause of fear would need to be on the other side in—"

"Pshaw!" said the young lady, interrupting him unceremoniously. "Do you think I care for such a threadbare compliment, Charley? If you could only correct that habit of paying compliments—such high-flown, foolish compliments, too!—it would improve you so much," she added, candidly.

"You are breaking me of it, by degrees," answered he; "but it *is* a habit, you know, and one of very long standing."

"I can't see the sense of it," said Miss Aylmer, meditatively. "If you only deceived anybody now—but you know you don't. I am confident that there is no woman alive silly enough to believe such nonsense as you were about to utter a minute ago."

"Speak for yourself," retorted he, with a laugh. "The majority of women like it exceedingly, and believe it unhesitatingly. Singularly enough, when it is flattery, they accept it undoubtingly; and it is only when it is truth that they distrust, as you are doing now."

"Charley, you are incorrigible!"

"Am I? Well, think so, if you like. Now tell me how you came to be out here. You must have been very much abstracted to have wandered so far."

"No: I was very angry."

"You!"

Trust a lover for expressing himself well. A hundred panegyrics on her manifold charms could not have brought so forcibly to Valerie's appreciation the supreme height to which this brave heart's devotion had raised her, as did that one simple monosyllable. She flushed brightly under color of the darkness—then answered, with a laugh:

"Yes—I! I hope you don't overrate me so much as to think me amiable? You should know better."

"I think you all things fair and noble," the young man replied, with such a softening in his tones, that this time Miss Aylmer did not think it necessary to call him to account for a compliment.

"Then indeed you do overrate me very much," she said, quickly. "I am very impatient, very wilful, and, a little while ago, I was very angry."

"For that matter, I would not give a farthing for anybody who could not, under just provocation, be very angry—and I am sure you had just provocation."

"I thought so, undoubtedly. But then, when we want to be angry, don't we always think so?"

"Reasonable people do not so deceive themselves. And you are reasonable, are you not?"

"I hope so. How is it with yourself? But then I forgot—you are never angry."

"No," he replied, with candor. "I am afraid I must acknowledge myself as belonging to my own class of weak-minded people—for I really think I am incapable of becoming very angry. At least I never, to my knowledge, have been so—." He stopped suddenly, and added—"that is, never but once."

"But once? What a pity to spoil such an angelic whole by one exception! And how did you take the unusual occurrence, on that occasion?"

He shuddered, and answered in a tone very different from her jesting one:

"I can scarcely endure to think of it! It is like looking back on some paroxysm of madness—somewhat, as I imagine, a mind that is deranged must feel in lucid intervals. A sort of devil seemed to take possession of me for a time—and in that time murder would have been as easy a thing to me as now to lift my hand and break off this flower."

There was a moment's pause, disturbed only by the snap with which he decapitated one of the slender stems clambering near him of its crowning blossom. Then he went on:

"Ever since that revelation, I have been afraid of myself. It was such a terrible thing! I was no more myself—no more capable of controlling my passions when that raging fiend entered into me—than the madman who is put in a strait-jacket under lock and key."

"How very strange!" said Valerie, the more interested, as the speaker's tones had deepened into positive agitation. "How long ago was it that you made this discovery?"

"Several years—in fact, it was just before the war."

"About the time of your last cruise in the Mediterranean?"

"Yes."

"And—" She paused a moment, in doubt as to the propriety of the next question—but curiosity overcame her scruples. "And did you do any thing very dreadful under that influence?"

"I did something which I shall never cease to regret until I cease to live." There was a silence of several minutes after that reply. There was such a tone of agony in his voice, that Valerie felt sorry for having started the subject, and also, for once, rather uncertain what to say next, until she suddenly bethought herself that, all things considered, this starlight *tête-à-tête* was not the most "proper" thing in the world. With her accustomed promptitude she at once acted on the recollection.

"Dear me!" she said, with a start; "What will papa think of me? It must be long past tea-time, and here I am a quarter of a mile at least from the house! I hope you are not very hungry, Charley—for I really did not mean to entertain you on rose-petals."

"Pray don't allow any consideration for my appetite to drive you away," the young man laughingly replied. "I am satisfied to go supperless, provided you will bear me company."

"I am afraid papa would object," Miss Aylmer answered, as she descended the steps, and turned toward the house. "He is in need of somebody to pour out his coffee, you know. It must be growing cold, by-the-by; and I am confident he has sent two or three messengers for me. Yonder! is not that one now?"

"I think it is my friend Mark Antony, whom I surprised in the humane occupation of drowning a kitten in your fountain, this morning," her companion replied, as a small black figure ran up to them, and paused breathlessly.

"Miss Valerie—" puff—"massa says—" puff—"as how he's a waiten—" puff—"supper for you, ma'am—" puff, puff!

"Go back and tell him I am coming," the young lady coolly replied; "and that Mr. Hautaine is coming also.—You ought to be obliged to me for that piece of information," she said to Mr. Hautaine, as the sable messenger sped back again, with an utter disregard of his insolvent condition in the matter of breath. "It will give papa time to order up a bottle of some fine champagne which he received only this afternoon. He says it is a pleasure to offer you good wine; you are such a capital judge of vintages and flavors, and the like."

"Yes," said he, with something of a sigh; "I wish I had bestowed half the culture on my head that I gave to my palate, and then I might be able to talk German mysticism and French sentiment, to quote Goethe and Lamartine, and Jean Paul, and the rest of that ilk, as well as your priggish friend Morton."

"I'll thank you not to call him my friend," said Miss Aylmer, stiffly. "You know I don't like him!"

"I never did you so much injustice as to suppose you liked him—but you like the same sort of things that he likes."

"I really don't see that."

"Don't you? Well, I do. Heaven only knows where he got his learning—out of hand-books of literature, and dictionaries of quotation, I am inclined to think—but at least he seems to amuse you moderately well; and that is more than I always, or often, accomplish."

"Charley, you are absurd!" said Miss Aylmer, half-amused, half-indignant. "You know I only tolerate him. He *is* a prig, and a detestable one—and, I give you my word, I hate even Raphael, and Mozart, and Dante, when I hear him talk of them! *A propos de rien*, where is Mark Boyd? I did not meet him at Mrs. Lysle's last night did I?"

"I think not—since he went down to the city some days ago. He'll be back, however, before you leave for Arkansas—or, if not, he will soon follow you there."

"He will not find me, then," said Miss Aylmer, with malicious coolness. "I shall indeed leave soon, but it will be for—Baltimore."

"Baltimore!" The exclamation was a violent one. There followed a moment's pause, and then—"You are surely jesting!"

"Jesting! Why should you think so Grandpapa lives in Baltimore, you know. Is there any thing strange in my going to see him?"

"No—of course not," said Mr. Hautaine, who had now somewhat recovered himself. "Only it was a surprise, and therefore—last night, you know, we were making plans for our month on Red River."

"Yes, I know. But last night is not—to-night! A profound truth, which means that, since I was making those plans, circumstances have arisen—that is, come to my knowledge—which will bear me off on the wings of discontent to Baltimore."

"Then you don't wish to go?"

"Ask me if I wish to put my hand in the fire," she replied, with ill-restrained bitterness. "I might, under some circumstances, tell you that it was necessary, but I could never tell you that I wished to do so."

"Then," said the astonished gentleman, "why *do* you go?"

"Because—I must," she answered. "Look! There is poor papa in the dining-room all alone, waiting patiently for his truant daughter. Come in, Charley. Perhaps the sight of you will console him. Gerald is not at home to-night—I should not have forgotten to say so, for I suppose, of course, you came to see him."

"Of course," said Mr. Hautaine, dryly. Then he drew back the sweeping folds of the lace curtain, that the night breeze was gently swaying to and fro, and held it on one side, while his companion stepped through a French window into the dining-room, where a tea-table all glittering with silver and china stood, and where General Aylmer was solacing himself with a newspaper during his period of enforced waiting.

CHAPTER III.

PUTTING IT TO THE TOUCH.

"PRAY, Charley, put that guitar down. I have a question to ask you; and one can't talk with thrum-thrum in one's ears all the time."

"To hear is to obey," said Charley; and he submissively laid the guitar down at the feet of his fair mistress, and looked up into her face.

They made a very pretty picture, as they sat at one end of the large drawing-room, for it was two or three hours after supper, and General Aylmer had taken himself off some time before—not out of consideration, as might perhaps be supposed, but simply because he would as soon have considered one of his own sons "company," as Charley Hautaine, who was the daily visitor of the house, and had been the intimate companion of his children ever since they knew what it was to have a companion. So, he had taken himself off, and the two young people had been singing duets to a guitar accompaniment for a while, and then had been talking gay nonsense while Charley still ran his fingers over the strings, until Valerie suddenly broke in with the words recorded above. As already stated, her vassal obeyed at once. He laid the guitar down, and looked up for her next commands. She paused a moment—and just then the picture was prettier than ever. Miss Aylmer, who was at all times fond of assuming attitudes which were out of the routine of social habit, was nestling among a pile of cushions placed immediately beside one of the open windows; and the *pose* of careless languor was also one of inimitable grace, while every waving outline of her figure was thrown into strong relief by the dark cushions against which she leaned. Her late emotion, or, perhaps, her late exercise, had given to her cheek the rich pomegranate flush peculiar to it—the proud scarlet lips, always so *mutine* and lovely, now wore their most enchanting smile—the dark eyes were all aglow with a thousand varying lights and shadows—and, in short, it was evident that *la belle des belles* (as the captives of her bow and spear had long since styled her) meant business, and was playing wild havoc with the heart of her attendant cavalier.

That this attendant cavalier was very "hard hit" was a matter not in the least open to doubt; indeed, it was a matter of such long standing that nobody in St. Stephen's Parish ever thought of doubting it. Everybody took it for granted that Valerie would end by marrying the handsome young sailor, who had been in love with her ever since he was in round-jackets and she in bib-aprons, and everybody was ready to cordially indorse her conduct whenever she did so. Nothing could possibly be more suitable, people said. They were of equal social position, both heirs-presumptive to more than moderate fortunes, both as charming and handsome as possible, and the gentleman, at least, so much in love that he made no pretext of concealing the fact. What more could any reasonable woman desire? According to the inference, Miss Aylmer was not a reasonable woman, for, up to this time, she had evinced no intention of surrendering her pleasant freedom; and, although she treated her sworn retainer with a kindness and cordiality only a shade different from that with which she treated her own brothers, she, nevertheless, fenced off any demonstrations of serious devotion very cleverly, and kept him at a distance as entirely as she kept many others. It somewhat puzzled his friends and acquaintances to imagine why Hautaine, who a good deal resembled young Lochinvar in the item of impetuosity, and had always shared the latter's cordial scorn for "a laggard in love," submitted to this capricious tyranny so quietly; and yet the reason was very simple. The young man was seriously and passionately in love—so much in love that diffidence of himself, and distrust of his own powers, had come to him for almost the first time in his life, and made him hesitate, as better men had hesitated before him, to put his fate to its crowning touch. Perhaps he felt, too, that this suspense, this uncertainty, was, after all, only a kind of *lex talionis* for his past trifling with other and more susceptible hearts than his own weather-beaten

organ; for it was not to be denied that he had done more mischief in that line than lies at the door of most of his lady-killing profession. He was clever, high-spirited, brave to a fault, thorough-bred within and without, and handsome as a prince in a fairy tale; so nobody wondered at this, or took the responsibility of blaming him—not even the girls with whom he flirted, or the men whom he rivalled. Indeed, nothing proved his complete distinction from that contemptible species styled the "male flirt" more than the warm and cordial liking which people of all ages and all sexes gave to him. The most spiteful never found any thing worse to say than that he was a spoiled puppy, while his many intimates were ready to swear by him as the most delightful of companions, and fastest of friends; and no one could show a better war record than this young sybarite of *idlesse* and luxury. He had not been long at home, nor did he propose remaining there. The only charm which now held him in America was, his love for Valerie Aylmer. Whether or not this charm would long continue to hold him, was a question yet unanswered; but, if Miss Aylmer had taken the vote of all her friends on the subject of his suit, she would have found their verdict singularly unanimous on the point that she "would never do better than to take him." Perhaps this was true; for there was about Charley Hautaine the best of all assurances that his youthful follies were only the surface froth that would pass away and leave, after a while, pure wine; the assurance, *without* which it is vain to hope for any young man's reform, and *with* which hope need never die—he was emphatically a gentleman!—gentleman, in that nameless refinement which no self-culture can ever give, but which comes alone of birth and breeding—gentleman, in the chivalric impulses and instinct which made the mere shadow of dishonor an impossible thing—gentleman, in all that touched the knightly creed of his race and his land—else, verily, he had never won a single approving glance from Valerie Aylmer's dark eyes, or merited a word of this already too prolix description.

He was reclining his well-formed figure, in an attitude not without grace, at her feet, and still gazing into her face, when at last Miss Aylmer spoke abruptly:

"You have been in Florence, have you not, Charley?"

The question was a very simple one, and by no means seemed to warrant the quick start of surprise, and yet quicker change of color, with which her companion heard it. He glanced up into her face, with a half-furtive scrutiny, as if searching there for a hidden motive in the words; but the frank, open gaze he met seemed to reassure him, for his brow cleared of its momentary cloud as he answered, readily enough:

"In Florence? I have been there, yes—but not very often; only once or twice, in fact. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing of much importance. I was only going to inquire—but it is scarcely likely, since you were there seldom—if you ever met, or heard of, an Irish artist of some note, who formerly lived there, named Darcy."

This time there was no mistaking the shock her words gave. Every vestige of color forsook Hautaine's face, at sound of the name which concluded her speech. The guitar dropped to the floor with a clang of its silver strings, and his eyes remained fastened on her in mute inquiry, that was not more startled than shocked.

"What is the matter?" Valerie inquired, with very natural surprise. "Why do you look at me so strangely? Was there any thing remarkable about the man?"

"About the man! Is it—is it possible you know him?"

"Know him? Of course not!—indeed, it was a very absurd question, now that I think of it: for I believe he has been dead for years."

"Oh! you mean the fa—" he stopped short, seemed to remember, and collect himself; for he added, more indifferently, "I did know a man of that name, but not the one to whom you allude."

"It might have been his son," said Valerie, with an interest which her companion thought very misplaced.

"Perhaps so. Here!—see how well I

have tuned this miserable C string! Now, will you sing *Chagrin d'Amour?*"

"Not just now. I am in the humor for talking, I believe. Tell me something about this Mr. Darcy—what manner of man is he?"

"I—really scarcely know how to describe him. Portrait-painting is his trade—not mine. I used to lounge in his studio—that's all."

"He, too, is an artist then? A portrait-painter, you say?" She looked rather surprised.

Hautaine gave a keen and not a little troubled glance at her face, before he said, slowly:

"You seem very much interested about him!"

"Oh, not at all!" She sank back into her cushions, and the face relapsed from animation into listlessness. "I only felt a slight curiosity, because he is—I believe—a connection of mine."

"What! *Darcy* a connection of yours?"

Miss Aylmer winced somewhat at the tone of this exclamation; then, after a pause, she spoke rather distantly: "Will you please be so kind as to tell me what you know of Mr. Darcy? As I said, he is a connection of mine, and this fact must excuse my curiosity to learn what can possibly be so dreadful about him."

"Dreadful!" said her companion, hurriedly. "Excuse my repeating the word; but indeed I have expressed myself very badly, if any thing which I have said has conveyed an unfavorable opinion of him."

"It is evident that you do not like him. Why?"

"You are mistaken, I do; I mean I did, when I knew him, like him—" His voice faltered, but he added, earnestly, "I never knew a man more perfectly unexceptionable."

"Then why did you consider it necessary to seem so much surprised—almost shocked—when I mentioned our relationship?"

"Relationship? I thought you said it was only connection!"

"Well, connection. What was there in that so startling?"

"Upon my word, you are a close questioner," he said, forcing a smile. "I was surprised, because—well, because naturally I never had imagined connection between yourself and this Irish artist."

Valerie bit her lip. Such is the weakness of human nature that, although a moment before the truth concerning that close connection which existed between this unknown relative and the projected visit to Baltimore had trembled on her tongue, the tone which pronounced those last words—"this Irish artist"—effectually hushed them back into silence. When she spoke next, it was to say, quite indifferently:

"Do you know that he served in our army during the war?"

"No; but I am not surprised to hear it."

"Why not?"

"Because—" he hesitated a moment—"because it is what I would have expected of him."

"Why? Excuse my persistence, but a fighting artist is something so entirely unique that one cannot help feeling a little curious about such a *rara avis*. Why did you expect it of him?"

"Because if he had not been an artist I am sure he would have been a soldier; and, as it was, he had quite as much soldier as artist about him. Is that enough?"

"It is enough to stimulate my appetite for more, if that is what you mean. Is he young?"

"Not very."

"Handsome?"

"I—really don't remember. Moderately good-looking, I believe. I would have paid more attention to him," he went on, with another forced smile, "if I could have foreseen your interest."

"I have no interest, only a little curiosity," said Miss Aylmer, somewhat piqued. Then she rose and sauntered toward the piano.

"Bring the guitar with you," she said to Hautaine, who had risen eagerly to follow. "We will try that duet from 'Rigoletto' once more, since we are not likely to have many more opportunities to do so."

"I think this is at least the third time, since supper, that you have made that in-

spiriting remark," said the gentleman, doing as he was bid, coming forward with the azure ribbons of the instrument slung across his shoulder, as if he had been a troubadour. "Pray, how do you intend to dispose of yourself in Baltimore, that you think it necessary to adopt such a farewell tone?"

"One naturally looks forward to a disagreeable thing as a very long one," she answered. "I am sure you ought to sympathize with me, for you remember the passage you are so fond of quoting from Bulwer—'A chord, stronger or weaker, is snapped asunder at every parting, and Time's busy fingers are not practised in replicing broken ties?'"

"I remember," the young man said, quite gravely, as he unslung the guitar from over his shoulder, and laid it down across the piano—"I remember—and, if indeed 'eternity itself cannot restore the loss struck from the minute,' imagine what I feel, when I see slipping from me now moments so golden that I dare not hope they can ever be restored or repeated."

"I am sure I'm much obliged to you," Miss Alymer returned, laughingly. "Your misgivings are certainly complimentary! Do you think I will grow so dreadfully old and ugly, in a few months, that I can never again make an hour golden by the light of my eyes?"

"No," he answered, reproachfully. "You know I do not think so! I only think—I only feel—that for me all may be changed when we meet again. It would be heresy to doubt that your eyes will be as bright, and your smile as sweet, as now; but yet, all the same, they may have lost their sunshine.

> 'If they be not fair to me,
> What care I how fair they be?'"

"I suppose you mean that you will have transferred your wandering devotion to some worthier shrine, by that time—" said Valerie, maliciously. "*N'importe!* perhaps I may be able to console myself, even for such a desertion?"

"You seem wilfully determined to misunderstand me," her companion answered, looking down into her laughing eyes with a serious gravity that made Mademoiselle Valerie feel rather uncomfortable—as if a crisis was at hand, and the helm had somehow slipped out of her dexterous grasp. She made one bold effort to regain the management of affairs, and, to do her justice, she was generally equal to any emergency that might arise in a matter of this kind.

"Oh no," she answered, gayly, "I don't misunderstand you, I am sure; and I don't at all blame you. It is the most convenient philosophy in the world, that of the enjoyment of the hour, and one I always make a rule to practise. *Vive la bagatelle!* Life is too short to be spent in remembering people, when they are not immediately in one's sight." And, turning round to the keyboard before he could reply, her clear voice was ringing out.

> "'"Tis good to be merry and wise,
> 'Tis good to be honest and true:
> 'Tis good to be off with the old love,
> Before you are on with the new.'"

"That is all very fine," said Mr. Hautaine, coolly; "but when one has no intention either of being off with an old love or on with a new, I confess I don't perceive the application."

"*Qui s'excuse, s'accuse!* How do you know that I was not applying my song to myself?"

"I would not do you such injustice."

"Injustice! What do you mean?"

"Only that a woman should never at least *acknowledge* more than one love."

"She is most fortunate who acknowledges none," said Miss Alymer, throwing back her head. "Of all my favorite heroines, Beatrice stands chief—if only for the spirit that 'would rather have heard her dog bark at a crow, than a man swear he loved her.'"

"I will not pray, with Benedict, that 'God may keep your ladyship long in that mind,'" Hautaine answered; "for, at present, I am rather bent on bringing your ladyship out of that mind! In other words, you have stopped me a hundred times, when you knew as well as I did what I was going to say. Now I defy you to prevent yourself from hearing that I love you!—Valerie, I love you!"

Few words, but expressive—so expres-

sive of a passion which she had not credited in this versatile, pleasure-loving nature, that Valerie actually started, as they fell on her ear. But she did not lift her eyes from the page of music she had taken up; and when a deep silence fell, in which she could almost hear the quick throbbing of the heart whose pulses were beating beside her, she only said, in a half-careless, half-petulant tone:

"Well—and what of that?"

Hautaine turned suddenly, and looked down at her, in a sort of mute exasperation. She had been a puzzle to him, and a trial to him at all times; but never more either puzzle or trial than as she sat before him now, the picture of cool nonchalance, with a mischievous light gleaming in the eyes that at last raised themselves to meet his own.

"Well, what of that?" she repeated, lightly. "I hope you don't expect me to feel overpowered by having drawn forth that novel observation? Tell me, candidly—as a matter of abstract curiosity, I should like to know—how much do you vary the formula of that speech, with the dozens of applications you have already made of it in the past, and will make of it in the future?"

"You are paying yourself even a poorer compliment than you pay me," said he, a little haughtily, "if you suppose that I have ever said to any other woman what I say to you when I tell you that I love you; but then it is folly to tell you that, for you know it now, and have known it all the time. When I ask you, then, as earnestly as possible, to consider the proposal which, in all solemn seriousness—"

"Solemn seriousness? Why, we are growing terribly grave! And suppose I humbly beg leave to decline considering it at all?"

"In that case," he answered, quietly, although his face paled at her words, "I can only regret to have pained myself—not you, fortunately—in an unnecessary manner; and bid you good-evening."

He bowed very low and very gracefully. Like all of his race, the spirit of the chevalier came to the surface, whenever any sudden dart probed his nature to the quick. Then he turned toward the door. Now, this unexpected evacuation of the field was not at all what Miss Aylmer had either expected or desired. One moment she watched him in silent astonishment; the next, her power of speech returned, and with it her power of action.

"Stop, Charley! — stop!" she cried, springing forward, and throwing down the music-stool with a crash that waked Sprite from a comfortable nap in the sofa-corner, and brought Hautaine to a halt at once. The next moment, her hand was on his arm, and voice and glance together brought a battery to bear.

"Charley! You surely are not angry with me?"

Poor Charley!—it was all up with him then. He had not so effectually stopped his ears with injured feeling, for the tones of the siren not to penetrate the insufficient guard.

"Angry with you!" he repeated, in a tone of mingled tenderness and reproach. "I do not know that I have ever been that, Valerie; although you have tried me right hardly, sometimes, and hardest of all to-night. At least, if I ever was, you know your own power too well to think that I could continue so."

"Well, come back, then, like a sensible man, and don't let us have any more heroics," said she, leading the way again toward the piano. "Just look at that stool!—and at poor dear little Sprite's eyes!—Never mind, pet, Mr. Hautaine has promised better behavior; and we won't be so impetuous any more."

"Mr. Hautaine must make his own conditions, then," said that gentleman, as he lifted the recumbent stool to its proper position. "He has put his fate to the touch, and he means to have his answer to-night, come what will."

"Let us interlude business with a little music," said Miss Aylmer, sinking down into a deep chair. "Please sing the *M'appari* for me."

"If I sing any thing at all, I think it had better be '*Ah! ride del mio pianto*,'" he answered, leaning against the instrument, but evidently with no intention of touching it. "Sorry as I am to be disobl'ging, I

must. however, decline to gratify you, until this matter of mine is disposed of."

"Do you know that you are very much spoiled? You are growing absolutely dictatorial."

"If I am spoiled, your conscience certainly need not reproach you with any share in the blame of it. And it is high time that I became a little dictatorial—if, by that, you mean considerate of my own self-respect."

"You use strong words, sir!"

"Strong words are the only exponents of strong feelings! I may be forced to use yet stronger ones before I again have the honor of saying good-night."

Miss Aylmer sat up in her chair—she had been lying indolently back before—and indulged in a stare at the flushed and resolute face looking at her.

"Charley, I confess I don't understand you to-night; you don't seem at all like yourself."

"So much the better," said Charley, with imperturbable composure. "Myself you have long known, and treated, I am sorry to say, with profound disregard. I now introduce to you a man whom you may consider worthy of a little more respectful attention."

"And what does this new acquaintance—who I am not sure I shall like half as well as the old one—expect of me?"

"He has no right to expect any thing. He only asks a return from your heart for the love of his."

The tone of mingled dignity and feeling could not have failed to touch any woman—and it sent a quick throb through Valerie's breast. She felt at once that trifling was at an end here, and that she stood face to face with a crisis of her life—a crisis of the two lives whose future fate she held at that moment in her hand. She looked up with a sudden strange gravity on her face, a hesitancy and regret in her voice.

"Charley, I fear I cannot give him that."

A profound silence followed those words—words so few and simple, yet which gave a sharp death-stab to the hope burning so brightly the moment before. Hautaine made no answer, for he could not trust his voice to speak, lest some rising weakness should betray him. He had scarcely realized how infinitely dear to him this woman was, until her own lips withdrew her beyond his reach; and a sudden darkness seemed to fall over all the things of life, in the certainty that her smile was gone from them forever! He still stood looking down at her—but perfectly motionless, with only a slight twitching of his long, silken mustache, to indicate how strong was the feeling the manifestation of which he repressed. Valerie waited vainly for him to speak: waited until she grew almost frightened at his unmoved quietude. Then she spoke herself, very timidly:

"Charley, do you really care for me—very much?"

"I don't think I need to answer that question," he said, a little hoarsely.

"No," she replied, quickly. "I know you do—now. But now is so very different from hereafter—with you, especially! Therefore, I am not sure that it would be right—"

"Good Heavens!" he interrupted, passionately. "If it can be that you hesitate to accept me, only because you doubt whether my love for you is as far removed as the poles from my fancies for other women, don't hesitate for one moment to try me! Let the test be as long and as hard as you please! Only try me—only believe me!"

Valerie flushed warmly. No woman could have heard those tones, and met the glance which accompanied them, unmoved, even if she had entertained no tenderness toward the speaker; far less when, as in the present instance, her warm and cordial liking for him stopped only just short of love—that love which the majority of the human race die without ever having known, and of which ten thousand counterfeits worse than this pass current in the world every day. She held out her hand, with a grace all her own—as a queen might have extended it to some faithful knight who had done gallant battle in her service.

"I do believe you, and thank you," she said simply, but with so gentle and altogether charming an accent, that Hautaine would have been something less than man

it he had not raised that hand to his lips. But he knew his lady-love well enough not to release it at once then; for, with all her gay coquetries, no prude ever less allowed the shadow of a personal liberty than Miss Aylmer; nor was he so blind as to mistake that frank impulse of woman's gratitude for the shyer token of woman's love.

"Now listen," she said, in her usual tone, "and see if you are ready to accede to my conditions, which, I warn you beforehand, are very unreasonable ones. You are mistaken in one thing: it is not you whom I distrust, but myself. I like you better—much better—than any one else I have ever seen; but I do not think I love you. I do not think so, but my ideas of that passion may be too exalted, and I may care for you as much as I am capable of caring for anybody. Now, there is only one way to solve the question. It is said that absence strengthens a real passion, and extinguishes a false one. What I propose, therefore, is to try absence."

"On me?"

"No, on myself. Six months from to-day I shall be able to tell you whether my liking—my affection—for you, is only that which one entertains for a charming friend, or that which one should bear one's future lord and master! But it is for you to decide whether or not you will wait six months for the answer which you have a right to demand to-night."

A vivid flash of hope and joy lit up the handsome face, and the hazel eyes were glowing and dazzling, as Hautaine bent low over the hand which this time he did not release, saying:

"Six months or six years—if, at the end of that time, I can hope to claim this for my own!"

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE WING.

It was part of General Aylmer's worldly-wise policy to be always prompt in action, especially with any one whose resolution of any kind he had reason to doubt. Now, he had reason—or thought he had reason—for very seriously doubting his daughter's resolution in regard to the promised visit to Baltimore; so he took care to give her no time for vacillation or retreat. When she came down to breakfast on the morning after the decisive interview, he told her that he had already written to M. Vacquant, announcing her coming, and that he hoped she would begin her preparations at once. "I know, of course, that they will be tremendous," he said, with a shrug, "but you must try and be ready by the end of the month, Valerie. I want to start then."

"So soon, papa?" said Valerie, naturally taken aback, and opening her eyes not a little. "Why, surely there is no hurry! If we reach Baltimore by Christmas, it will be time enough."

"Hadn't you better say by spring?" asked her father, in an irritated tone. "If you are not going to do the thing gracefully and well, you had better not have agreed to do it at all. Besides, I shall be able to find time to take you about the close of this month; but, after that, I shall have no leisure. My business engagements will keep me in New Orleans all winter."

"But Gerald—"

"Gerald has to remain here. He can't be spared to play escort at a moment's notice."

"But three weeks, papa! How can I ever be ready?"

"By going to work at once. Come, I have to go down to the city to-day. Make out a list for Madame What's-her-name, and I will take it to her."

"Can't I go with you? I should like to see her myself."

"If you won't keep me waiting, you can go. The boat is nearly due, however."

"I will be ready," said Valerie, draining a cup of coffee, with a sigh. She saw that the general's mind was made up, and that, if she meant to go to Baltimore at all, she might as well submit with a good grace, and go at once. So, by dint of vigorous preparation, she announced at the end of three weeks that she was in travelling order, and her father at once set the day of departure.

On the eve of that day, Miss Aylmer's chamber presented a scene of confusion such as only the chamber of a young lady of the present careless time possibly could. Into no other place could such a mass of rainbow-tinted dresses, scarfs, ribbons, laces, trinkets, and shawls, have been gathered in disorder so complete, yet so picturesque, or such monster trunks have stood yawning for the reception of what seemed likely to overflow even their mammoth capacities. Wardrobes and drawers had emptied their contents over every available article of furniture in the room—covering the snowy expanse of the bed, and every chair, with multitudinous odds and ends; so that the only thing which at all fulfilled its natural use was a low, broad couch under one of the windows, where the titular goddess of this overcast shrine reposed in the luxurious *abandon* of the siesta—apparently undisturbed by, and, in fact, unconscious of, all the confusion around her. Not even the sound of voices roused her, though these voices were not slightly animated; for the young lady, who knelt before a large trunk that occupied the centre of the floor, was in the act of demonstrating to a couple of sable attendants that art of good packing which consists in getting the largest possible amount into the smallest possible space.

"Now, Fanchette," she was saying, "I hope I have proved to your satisfaction that it was perfectly possible to put every thing in one tray, which you intended for two. Hand me another of those skirts. I believe I can get it in here also. What are you about, there? Don't you know you must not put that heavy silk on top of those light organdies?"

"It won't hurt 'em, Miss Netta."

"Won't hurt them! You must be crazy! I wonder what Valerie's dresses look like, when she reaches the end of a journey, if you have the packing of her trunks! Now, understand, once for all, that thick things always go to the bottom, and thin ones on top—do you hear?"

Fanchette said "Yes'm" very meekly, and lifted the silk from its condemned position; but, for all that, the glance which she exchanged with her co-laborer did not savor much of reform; and, if Miss Fane had seen it, she might have been assured that lessons for general application are always wasted on the race to which Fanchette belonged; and that her friend's dresses were quite as likely to be crushed by bad packing in the future, as in the past. She did not see it, however; so she went on with her efforts to reduce order from chaos.

"All the heavy dresses must go by themselves in that trunk yonder—this is for the light ones. Hand me that poplin, and let me give you a lesson how to fold the skirt—for Charlotte, I see, is ruining the one she is attempting to put together. Now look, both of you! back and front together thus—the train laid over, so—then folded this way—and then that! Valerie, dear, where shall your grenadines go?"

Miss Aylmer opened her eyes at this appeal, and cast a helpless glance from the garments in question to the waiting trunks.

"Indeed, Netta, I don't know—anywhere that they can get, I suppose."

"Thank you," said Netta, dryly; "that is so very satisfactory! Here, Charlotte, bring them here.—Valerie, do you want either of them left out for this evening?"

"No."

"What are you going to wear?"

"The barége I had on yesterday," said Valerie, as if every word was wrung from her by the severest effort.

"You know that won't do! There will be at least a dozen people here to-night."

"What do I care? Can't you let me sleep in peace now?"

"No, I can't. It is five o'clock, and fully time you were up. Before you have accomplished that endless business of your toilet, somebody will come in—Charley Hautaine, I'll answer for."

"Charley Hautaine can wait until I am ready to receive him."

"Valerie, I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself!"

"Ashamed! What, of teaching one man—and a very badly-spoiled man—his proper place? I hope I shall never do any thing to be more ashamed of. Now let me rest in peace."

"Rest in peace, if you please; but I

hope you will some day be made to feel in your own person something of all this which you treat so lightly in others."

"What do you mean by 'all this?'"

"I mean this passion, this impatience, this—this love, in one word."

"You had better wish me dead, at once!" said Miss Aylmer, rousing at last to a point of some energy.

"So at last you have an inkling of what it is? No, I had better not wish you dead. On the contrary, such an event would be of service to you, in more ways than one. And when you do feel it, and are made thoroughly uncomfortable, just oblige me by remembering a few of the mice you play with at present—my poor young cousin, especially."

"Your poor young cousin! To hear you talk of him, one would think that he was a tender lamb, just escaped from the parental fold, instead of an accomplished wolf in sheep's clothing, fully capable of taking care of himself—and of other people, too!"

"Whatever he may be, as far as other people are concerned, you know you have put it out of his power to show any wisdom about you—else, certainly, he would not ride over here every day to be snubbed for his pains."

"Oh, nonsense!"

And, with this summary conclusion to the conversation, Miss Aylmer buried her head in the pillows, and went to sleep again.

She was not destined to slumber long undisturbed, however. Before the clock on the mantel had chimed a quarter-past five, a knock at the door was followed by the intelligence that Mr. Hautaine was downstairs, and had asked for Miss Valerie.

"Miss Valerie is asleep. But I will waken her, and make her dress. Tell Charley she will be down in about an hour."

With this consolatory message, Miss Fane shut the door in John's face, and returned to make a decisive charge on the enemy's lines.

"Move those trunks out of the way," she said, to the maids. "We have nearly finished, and the few things that remain to be packed can go in to-morrow morning. Now, Valerie, my dear, you must get up."

"Who says so?" inquired that young lady, without moving an inch.

"I say so. You may treat Charley as you please—or as he pleases to let you—but you know your father will expect you to be ready to receive your friends who are coming to bid you good-by, and who will certainly be here before you are dressed, if you don't rise at once. So, up with you!"

Miss Aylmer raised herself suddenly, and threw her arms round her friend, as if with an intention of smothering her, accompanying this unexpected demonstration with a tone of the most genuine pathos.

"Oh, Netta!—my dear, good Netta, how shall I ever live without you? Who will make me do things when you are away?"

"You foolish child!" said Miss Fane, as she smoothed back the heavy masses of hair, and looked down into the dark eyes with one of the sweetest smiles that ever made at once lovely and lovable a human face. "I should think you would be more glad than sorry to part with your troublesome mentress."

"It is you who are foolish now," said Miss Aylmer, decidedly. "Sit down here," she added, pushing her into a low chair beside the couch. "I want to talk to you a little while before we go down to all those tiresome people who are coming."

"But, Valerie, indeed, it is time that you were dressing!"

"*Qu'importe?* I will show you that I can dress in ten minutes, if you will just be still and listen to me. Netta, dear, do—do you really think that I have treated Charley Hautaine very badly?"

"Valerie, dear," answered her friend, gravely, "I don't think you have treated him well; but I don't think you have acted any worse toward him than I have seen you act toward many others."

"Consoling, upon my word!" said Valerie, with a comic grimace. "Well, then, perhaps you may think a little better of me, if I tell you that I firmly expect to make amends for all my high crimes and misdemeanors, by ending my days as—Mrs. Charles Hautaine!"

"Valerie!—you must be jesting!"

"I assure you I am not jesting in the least—unless Marshal McMahon or Owen Meredith should hear of my manifold charms, and feel impelled to come over and make me an offer. I should certainly accept either of the two; but I am afraid I am scarcely justified in reckoning very confidently on a proposal from one of them."

"Valerie, there is really no time for me to sit and listen to such nonsense! If you will not dress, I must do so."

But Valerie had no idea of allowing this. Being in a talking mood, she was determined that her companion should listen; and she kept a firm hold on Miss Fane's dress, as the latter attempted to rise.

"No, no, *mignon*, not yet! You think I am jesting, but indeed I am not."

Her friend turned and looked at her intently.

"Valerie, I do not understand you. Is this on your honor?"

"On my honor."

"You are engaged to Charley, then?"

Valerie laughed.

"Why should you think that? No; I have not yet given 'a clod of wayward marl" such dominion over me."

"Then what do you mean—if you really mean any thing?"

"I only mean that I have promised to tell Charley, six months hence, whether or not I like him well enough to immolate myself on the matrimonial altar for his sake, and I rather think he will be made happy by an affirmative decision."

"Do you seriously mean that Charley has consented to wait six months for the pleasure of being rejected?"

"The pleasure of being rejected! Indeed, Netta, I don't know what you mean, when I have just told you—"

"Yes, I remember what you have just told me. But I take the liberty of knowing you a little better than you know yourself, if you really think that, six months hence, you will not like some other man as well or better than you like Charley now."

"You are certainly complimentary!"

"I am not trying to be complimentary. There are enough people to play that *rôle*, without my attempting it. What I am anxious to hear is, whether Charley has consented to such a proposition."

"Undoubtedly, he consented. And was glad enough to do so!"

"Then," said Miss Fane, rising, as if to give additional force to her expression of opinion, "I wash my hands of all concern in his affairs; and deliver him over to your tender mercies, without even a desire to save him. He deserves all that he will be sure to get, for he is more hopelessly absurd than even I had imagined!"

And with this final disposition of the gentleman, who was just then impatiently pacing the front piazza, and rushing into the hall, every time he heard a step on the stairs, she walked to the mirror, and began to take down her hair, as a preliminary to its rearrangement. Valerie lay back on her pillows, and watched the process with an indolent interest which lasted some time. The massive and glossy knot behind (Miss Fane possessed a magnificent chevelure) had received its finishing touches before she spoke again, with a sort of dreamy languor in her tone.

"Netta, would you like to see me marry your cousin?"

"No," said her friend, promptly. "I should be very sorry to see it."

"Why?"

"Because I do not think you would suit Charley, and I am sure Charley would not suit you."

"Why would not I suit him?"

"For one thing, because he would soon become conscious, in the wife, of what he overlooks in the mistress—the absence of that devotion which would set him up on a pedestal, and worship him as a divinity. Also, he would feel what he has less sense than I give him credit for, if he does not acknowledge now that you have twice the talent, and three times the intellectual culture, that he possesses. And the one thing of all others which a man can least forgive in his wife, is mental superiority to himself."

"For argument's sake, granting what you say to be true, you surely cannot think so poorly of Charley, as to suppose that he would ever indulge a feeling which is, after

all, nothing more nor less than a petty vanity!"

"I think—I am glad to think—that Charley is, in every sense of the word, a gentleman; and that therefore he would never, even to himself, give expression to the feeling. But it would exist, nevertheless—a consciousness that could not be stifled."

"And pray why would he not suit me?"

"For the very best reason in the world: you need the hand of a master—poor, dear Charley would always be a slave."

"Netta," said her friend, decidedly, "I think you are the most disagreeable person I ever knew! I wish you would make haste and take yourself off down-stairs to entertain your poor, dear Charley!"

"You are very kind; but I have not the least intention of going, until I see you *en toilette*, and hear when it was that you entrapped that misguided son of ocean into this six months' postponement of a proposal."

"About three weeks ago—the night I first heard of this hateful visit to Baltimore."

"Ah, I see! You wanted to settle beforehand any hopes M. Vacquant and his nephew might entertain. But I wonder that even such a consideration as that induced you to think of relinquishing your dearly-prized freedom."

"It *is* a dreadful thought, this surrendering one's self to a life-long bondage," said Valerie, with a shudder. "But one has to marry some time—at least *I* have to; for an unmarried woman's place in the world is simply *nil;* and I have never discovered a vocation in myself for any thing but the world. Now, I don't suppose I shall ever find a more desirable *parti* than Charley, or a person less likely to prove disagreeable in the matrimonial connection."

"Poor Charley!"

"And pray why should you say 'Poor Charley' in that tone of commiseration?"

"Because I feel sincerely sorry for any man who offers honest devotion, and in return is only accepted as a *pis-aller!* I have been shocked by hearing other women talk so, Valerie; I confess I never expected it from you."

"You never expected it less than I did, Netta," said Valerie, gravely. "But we learn wisdom as we grow older; and, after all, are not we getting beyond the school-girl idea of romantic passion, and the like? Of course we believed in it devoutly four or five years ago, but do we believe in it now? Honestly, I don't! I don't believe that, excepting in novels, and with foolish women who set up idols, and fall down and worship them, there is such a thing as the love we have dreamed about. Do you?"

"Yes," said Miss Fane; "yes, I do. I'm never likely to know it, but I believe it none the less—believe it, just as I believe many things which are of faith, and not of sight."

"Well, I don't," said Valerie, decidedly; and she leaned back on her cushions, and gazed out of the window. "I think it is a fiction that the poets and novelists are in league to keep up, and the rest of the world are afraid to declare exploded. Is that nonsense? You look as if you thought so. But just tell me, Netta, did you ever know a real case of real love?"

Miss Fane thought a moment. "In my own experience, do you mean?" she asked.

"Of course, in your own experience."

"I am afraid I must say I never did; but still, I believe in it."

"I envy you your credulity," returned her skeptical friend. "But how can you believe what you have never seen? If I had ever seen it—seen, that is, not the flirtation of a few weeks, ending in a proposal, and a wedding, but the love which is strong to conquer, and stronger to endure—the love which absence cannot change, which difficulty only quickens, which suffering only elevates—I, too, might believe. But now—bah! I am a heretic of the straitest sect. Do you mean to say that, if women ever really felt as heroines are represented to feel, I should not before this have conceived a *grande passion* for some of the dear, charming boys I have known so well, and liked so much, while they were with me, and never cared a straw about, when they were away?"

"That is hardly a fair argument, Valerie."

"I should like to know where you could find a fairer one. I confess that I should

like to fall in love, if only for the novelty of the sensation," pursued the young lady, with meditative frankness. "I should like to know what it was to fancy somebody well enough to admire every thing he said or did —even his very absurdities—to put away the roses he had touched, and wear the dresses he had praised, to care as much about him when he was absent as when he was near—to count the hours of his absence, and look eagerly for his coming—to be willing to endure any degree of danger, or discomfort for his sake—and, finally, to let love cover even wrong and injury, if wrong or injury came. But then, I never shall know it, and this is all nonsense! I like Charley, as well as I can like anybody; and I mean to take him. I think I was foolish not to make the engagement absolute at once. Many women — women better in every way than I am—have waited longer than I have for their knight, and waited vainly. Some of them do as I am about to do—make respect and affection serve the place of love, and marry some pleasant and eligible person, whom they like well enough, for all practical purposes, to the end of their lives. Others, like yourself, disdain to take this course, and so go down to their graves in 'maiden meditation fancy free.' I am inclined to think that this class is much larger than the world believes."

"I certainly think it is a mistake to suppose that every woman has had, or must have, her love-story."

"I know it is a mistake; or, rather, it is a vulgar belief of vulgar minds, which no demonstration to the contrary could uproot. If the entire feminine sex were suddenly conveyed to the Castle of Truth, and examined on the point, I think we should hear some strange revelations from maids, wives, and widows; and I think the vast majority would be on my side, and declare that the coming man had never come into their lives at all."

"That would be my evidence, at least," said Miss Fane, laughing. "Now you have oratorized long enough. Suppose, by way of variety, you get up and dress?"

"You are not interested in my subject."

"Indeed I am—interested enough to hope that your coming man may make his appearance in time."

"Is that for my sake, or for Charley's?"

"For both—and equally. Only—don't fall in love with this cousin of yours."

"Had you not better caution me against throwing myself headlong into the Pataps co?" said Miss Aylmer, rising. "Please ring that bell for Fanchette. I want my blue grenadine, and I feel morally confident that it is down at the bottom of that largest trunk."

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

"MY PRETTY PAGE."

THE cold November morning was breaking drearily through a heavy white fog, that enveloped from sight all the low Maryland coast, and even the roofs and spires of Baltimore, when the Portsmouth boat steamed slowly up to her dock, after a very trying and disagreeable run. A stiffish gale is by no means to be despised — even on the Chesapeake—and, although there had been no very heavy sea the night before, yet many uncomfortable stomachs on board the Louisiana might have compared honorable notes with those belonging to any ocean-bound steamer the second day out. Sounds of woe had proceeded all night from various state-rooms; calls for sympathy, and for brandy, had been unnumbered; and, among the knot of passengers who stood on the wet deck in the cold, gray morning, and gloomily regarded the few landmarks that peered through the fog, the only feminine presence was that of Miss Aylmer, who, leaning on her father's arm, watched with evident interest as much of the surrounding prospect as could be seen.

"It does not look very interesting, does it, papa?" she said, as the fog partially lifted, and showed that portion of Baltimore which lies along the water's edge. "But then, I suppose one should not judge of a city by its approach, and in a fog, too. I only wonder—"

"Draw your shawl around you more closely; this air is very penetrating," said her father, as she paused. "Well—what is it you wonder?"

She hesitated a moment before she went on, rather thoughtfully:

"I only wonder whether I shall ever be reconciled to this visit. I am almost sure I never shall. I am almost sure this coming six months will prove as long in reality as it now seems in prospective."

"I should think you would know yourself better," said the general, dryly. "One opera, two balls, and a few conquests, will quite cure your homesickness. Indeed, I am half inclined to wager that, at the end of the six months, you will voluntarily prolong your visit, perhaps indefinitely."

"Don't wager much then, papa," retorted the young lady, with very nonchalant sauciness, "for I know you are not fond of losing. Ugh! what an odious climate! I cannot understand how grandpapa endures living in it—after New Orleans, too!"

"It *is* singular, considering that the climate of New Orleans is well known to be one of perfection."

"It is one of comfort and decency, at least, so I beg you won't sneer at it, papa. But then, grandpapa's coming here was all the fault of this second wife of his—was it not?"

"Entirely," the general answered "And, by-the-way, I am glad you mentioned her—for I had almost forgotten that I meant to give you a warning on that score She

is a very disagreeable woman; but you must really endeavor to conciliate her prejudices. Her influence over your grandfather is much greater than that of any one else; and there's no wiser policy than that of throwing a sop to Cerberus, you know.'

He spoke with studied carelessness—for no one better understood the art of clothing unpalatable advice in unpremeditated guise—yet the words brought a sudden cloud over his daughter's face. Her brow slightly contracted, and her lips compressed themselves, before she replied:

"I hoped I had heard the last of such warnings, papa. Surely there is nobody else to be conciliated, is there? And yet—in the face of all this—you think I shall find a visit here more than bearable? For my part, I shall be very glad if it does not prove much less. I believe I am chilled through. Will you please take me in?"

Her father complied very willingly. Indeed, it was quite time, the last motion of the boat having ceased, and the downward rush of passengers fairly begun.

General Aylmer and his daughter were experienced travellers, however, and possessed to perfection the rare capability of taking matters—even from a steamboat and railroad point of view — with a supreme quietude. They did not trouble themselves in the least about making haste to be gone; and Valerie was still standing by a table in the saloon, drawing on her gloves, and waiting for her father, who had returned to his state-room for some missing satchel, when a step on the gangway caused her to turn round, and thus confront a gentleman, who came forward with a look in his eyes that even dulness might have interpreted—a half-doubt, half-recognition, which made her absolutely certain he would, in another moment, utter her own name. During that moment, while he still paused irresolute, she took a rapid survey of his appearance; for one fact at least was undoubted—that of his complete strangeness to her.

Her first impression was, that she had never seen a handsomer man—if man he could properly be called, who was apparently so little past the age of adolescence that almost any one might have been tempted to exclaim, "What a beautiful boy!" There was all of boyhood's smoothness of outline, and clearness of tint, in the face whose refined features and waxen complexion suited its rich brown curls and lustrous eyes; all of boyhood's grace in the slender figure, that bore upon it a stamp of such thoroughbred elegance—yet there was about both an air and manner which proved conclusively that, for this man, boyhood was long since over. True, the downy softness had not yet left the rounded cheek, the pearly whiteness had not yet vanished from the smooth brow, and there was a curve of almost child-like beauty about the shapely mouth; but, on each and all of these features, there also rested a shade of intangible expression which aged the face without strengthening it, and marked it so plainly with the sign-manual of worldly intercourse and worldly thought, that no one, after a second glance, could possibly have mistaken the presence of manhood for that of youth. It was a beautiful face, but that was almost all that could be said of it. If there was any thing else about it at all remarkable, it might, perhaps, have been found in the total lack of any decided expression, either for good or ill. Nobody could have called it a pleasant face or a disagreeable face, an intellectual face or a stupid face, an honest face or a deceitful face, a face that prepossessed liking or inspired distrust; for, in truth, it was simply negative—a face of the kind that we see very often in the world, and that belongs to people who, as a general thing, lack both mental and moral force, and are exactly and entirely what circumstances make them. It was also emphatically, and in marked degree, a spoiled face. There was a curve of disdain about the mouth, and a cloud of petulance on the brow, which deepened and lightened continually, without ever quite vanishing, and made even the most careless observer sure that this man had never in his life known the curb of wholesome restraint, imposed either by others or himself.

With all her quickness of glance, Miss Aylmer had not noted more than these few general points, when the unknown ad

vanced directly to her side, saying, in a voice that suited his face, it was so very melodious:

"I am sure I cannot be mistaken in thinking that I have the pleasure of seeing Miss Aylmer. Let me bid her welcome to Baltimore, and introduce to her—Julian Romney."

Valerie started—then looked up with recognition. It was a name not wholly unfamiliar, though long forgotten—the name of her grandfather's step-son, who had been sent to a German university before his mother's second marriage, and whom, consequently, she had never met. Indeed, the gulf of non-intercourse between the two families—M. Vacquant remained in Baltimore during the war—had almost swept the recollection of his very existence out of her memory. She did not say so, however; on the contrary, she smiled cordially, and held out her hand in reply.

"I am charmed to meet you," she said, "for of course I have heard of you very often. I am only ashamed that my recognition was not like your own, instinctive."

"I trust my recognition would have been instinctive," the young man answered, smiling in his turn; "but, unfortunately, I cannot claim that merit for it. My stepfather has a miniature of you, and its want of justice does not altogether detract from its possession of likeness."

"Ah, of course—it was very stupid of me not to think," Valerie laughed. "I think I should have known you, though—after a while. But grandpapa and Madame Vacquant—I hope they are both well?"

"Quite well, and very anxious to see you; indeed, M. Vacquant is waiting below in the carriage now. Will you let me take you to him? That is—surely you are not travelling alone?"

"Oh, no.—Papa—but here he is.—Papa, this is Mr. Romney, who has been kind enough to come to meet us."

The general's memory of names was much better than his daughter's, as well as his memory of faces; and, looking at the young man before him, he saw a slightly-masculinized edition of his father-in-law's wife. He would have found no difficulty, therefore, in determining his identity, even if Valerie had not spoken, and his hand went out at once in its frank, genial greeting.

"I should have known you, Mr. Romney, by your likeness to your mother," he said. "I congratulate you on your return to America. As matters stand at present, a Baltimorean is almost the only person whom we *can* congratulate on such an event. When did you leave Jena?"

"Only within the last few months," answered the other, while Valerie marvelled now, as she had marvelled often before, at her father's wonderful recollection. Nothing seemed to escape him—not even the name of Julian Romney's university—when of Julian Romney himself she never remembered to have heard him speak. "Only within the last few months," repeated that young gentleman; "and, but for the fact that home is home, I might have been sorry enough to do so. As a place of residence, Germany is infinitely preferable to America, you know."

"Any place short of the Inferno would be that, just at present," said the general, with a shrug. "However, you might get on very well. You don't know any thing about war and devastation, just here."

It was now Romney's turn to shrug his shoulders, which he did very indolently and gracefully.

"You don't suppose I was thinking about war or devastation, or any thing of that kind?" he asked. "I don't trouble myself about those matters. I was thinking that the people are such barbarians, from an æsthetic point of view. But M. Vacquant must be very impatient. Will you excuse me if I suggest that you take com passion on him."

"M. Vacquant!" said General Aylmer, quickly. "I did not know that he was here—of course we will go at once.—Valerie, I wonder you waited for me. Give that shawl to Fanchette, and now, take care—these steps are confoundedly steep."

"Take care, Miss Aylmer," echoed Romney, for he saw that her eyes were not at all where they should have been, but rather on the dock beyond, where a private carriage was drawn up, at the door of

which her grandfather's face looked eagerly forth. "Take care—take care!"

The last caution went off like a pistol-shot, but it was too late. Valerie suddenly missed her footing—stumbled—made a grasp at the support—missed it—and fell heavily forward.

General Aylmer was too far in advance, Julian too much in the rear, to save her. They could only hasten to her assistance, and, as it chanced, the younger man was the first to reach her, the first to lift the prone figure, and look into the pale, stunned face, the first to inquire anxiously if she was badly hurt.

"I—I don't think I am hurt at all," she said, after a minute's pause. "At least—I cannot tell. I saved my head, and only my wrist pains."

"Take my arm, then, and try to walk," said the general. "Your grandfather is getting out of the carriage, I see. You must have alarmed him very much."

"Oh, I am sorry for that," she said, quickly; and she at once made an attempt to step forward, but it was only an attempt. A spasm of pain came over her face, and Romney, who was watching her, said, as he caught her just in time to prevent another fall:

"You have sprained your ankle?"

"Yes," she answered, with a gasp, "I think I have. What shall I do?—I cannot walk."

"We shall have to support you," said her father, with some annoyance in his voice.—"Mr. Romney, may I trouble you?—Valerie, there would have been none of this, if you had only looked where you were going."

Valerie did not reply; in fact her whole attention at that moment was concentrated on her ankle. The lightest pressure of her foot on the ground made it pain intensely; and she did not even remember until some time afterward how solicitous and careful was the support rendered by her new acquaintance. When they reached the carriage, M. Vacquant was very much concerned by the pallor of the face, which nevertheless contrived to greet him with a smile.

"*Ma pauvre enfant!*" he said, in the midst of his effusive embrace. "To think that such an accident should be your welcome among us! What was Julian about, that he did not take better care of you? I wish I had gone for you myself."

"Mr. Romney took very good care of me," said Valerie, with a grateful smile into the handsome face just then bending over her. "But he could not prevent my fall, you know. That was your fault, grandpapa—if it was any body's besides my own—for it was only because I was looking at you that I missed the step."

"Don't be ungrateful, Valerie, or your grandfather will think he had better have stayed at home," interposed General Aylmer, with a smile.—"My dear sir, I am delighted to see you again, and to see you looking so well. How much you escaped in not being battered about like the rest of us, during four years of hardship and war!"

"I don't know, I am sure," said M. Vacquant, a little shortly, for he always felt as if he had been somewhat derelict in not sharing the suffering of his country, and he did not much relish congratulations on the score of his exemption. "I am really unable to see that you are at all battered, Gerald. On the contrary, you seem quite as young-looking and good-looking as ever. But we may as well defer compliments until we are under way. Come in—*petite* looks too pale to be detained.—Home, John, and drive fast."

The coachman obeyed to the letter; but the foot of Union Dock and the head of Washington Place are two points of the good city of Baltimore which lie rather far apart; and, with all his speed, they had not made more than half their distance, when Romney, who was watching Valerie quite anxiously, said:

"I am sure you are suffering very much."

She looked up with a faint smile, but answered nothing, for she could not deny the assertion. The pain almost amounted to agony by this time, and required every particle of her self-control to endure it silently. So she only smiled, and clinched her hands tightly together, as people always do when they want to bear passively, while they rolled on—her father and M. Vacquant talk-

ing to each other of Louisiana people and things, Julian watching her silently, and she engrossed by the pain—along the crowded thoroughfares of business life, past the gay shops and streams of pedestrians, past the towering cathedral-dome, and into sight of a tall white column—when, just as she thought, "I cannot endure it another moment!" the carriage stopped, and Julian burst open the door before the footman could spring down to do so.

Dimly, Valerie saw that they had paused before a large gray house, with a stately portico and flight of marble steps guarded by couchant lions, and that, as they drew up, a gentleman, who was in the act of ascending these steps, turned hastily and came down again toward them. But physical agony had now reached the point of physical blindness, and she had only a vague idea of a strange face, in which there was a good deal of surprise, and heard her grandfather make some hurried explanation. Neither the face nor the explanation moved her to the least interest, however, until M. Vacquant turned round, saying with his most *grand-seigneur* air:

"Valerie, my love, your cousin—Maurice Darcy."

Then she looked up—curious to see this rival claimant of her inheritance, this cause of her present exile and suffering, this man whose name had been her *bête noire* for many weeks past; but, at the very moment when she raised her eyes, the tortured ankle gave one hot, sharp pang, that misted all the kind pity of Maurice Darcy's face, and made her extend her hand, with a sort of blind impulse, past him to Julian Romney.

"Take me out, please," she said to the latter, with a certain knowledge that in another second she would scream, despite herself.

Darcy drew back—Valerie never knew that his hand had been held out toward her with a kinsman's frank greeting, when she thus put it aside—and Romney assisted her to the ground, not without much difficulty and intense pain, however. Indeed, the blanching cheek proved such sharp suffering that it brought the other to her side all of a sudden, with one quick step.

"Let me assist you," he said to Julian. "Miss Aylmer is evidently suffering very much—too much for even an attempt at walking, I should say. Would it not be better if she was carried—"

But here Valerie interrupted him, almost rudely, for pain gave a sharper tone to her voice than was meant:

"Thank you, no. I can walk very well—with Mr. Romney's assistance."

"Pray let Maurice carry you, Valerie," said M. Vacquant's voice in the rear. "He is stronger than any of us—and well able to do so."

But Valerie only shook her head wilfully; and, as General Aylmer was not near enough to interfere, lifted her foot to take the first step of the flight before her. The result was easily to be foreseen—she gave one sharp cry, and fell back on Romney's shoulder.

The partial swoon which ensued was not so deep but that she heard M. Vacquant say, "Maurice, take her!"—but that she felt herself lifted at once by a pair of strong arms, carried like a child into the house, and, amid much feminine commotion, laid gently down on a softly-cushioned couch.

CHAPTER II.

A FREE LANCE OF TO-DAY.

When the doctor, who was hastily summoned, arrived, his first care was to relieve the injured foot of all ligatures; his second, to apply arnica-saturated bandages; and his third, to assure M. Vacquant that the patient needed only entire quiet. "She will not be able to walk for some time," he said, on taking his departure; "but she may probably be carried down-stairs and join the family circle to-morrow."

He was mistaken, however. The sprain proved more serious than had been imagined, and several days elapsed before Miss Aylmer summoned courage or inclination to make an appearance down-stairs. At last, one evening, a sudden whim, or fit of loneliness, seized her. She tossed the novel, over which she was yawning, clear across

the room, rang her bell, made a toilet, and, with the assistance of her own and Madame Vacquant's maids, managed to descend to the drawing-room, while dinner was yet in progress, and the coast clear.

"That will do, Fanchette," she said, to her faithful attendant, who, after she had been established on a sofa, still hovered over her, suggesting a pillow here, and a cushion there. "That really will do. I am very comfortable—more comfortable than I deserve to be," she added; "for I begin to think it was very foolish of me to come down."

"'Deed, ma'am, I think it was very right," Fanchette said, earnestly. "You was so lonesome-like up-stairs! It'll do you good to see some company."

"That's rather a question," her mistress answered, languidly. "I feel just now more as if it would tire me; and then, I never looked worse!"

"You looks pale, ma'am—but paleness is becoming to you," said Fanchette, consolingly; for Fanchette stood chief among the admirers of *la belle des belles*—a fact which in itself is no contemptible proof of the genuineness of Miss Aylmer's loveliness, since few scorns are more sincere than that of a maid for the beauty she daily aids in making up.

The invalid acknowledged her friendly comfort by a smile; and then nestled deeper into her cushions, saying, as she stretched out, with a slight grimace, the pretty sandalled foot that was resting on a pillow:

"I don't trust you, Fanchette; you consider me so entirely in the light of your handiwork, that you regard me with partial eyes. Throw that afghan lightly over me. There!—Is not some one coming?"

Before Fanchette could answer, the door opened, and a lady entered—a lady so handsome and stately, that, as she came forward in the full light of the chandelier, she looked more like some rare old picture stepped from its frame, than a mere flesh-and-blood woman of the present time. She was not a young woman, by any means, and not a woman who made any ill-judged attempt to look young; but every thing about her harmonized so perfectly, and was in such admirable keeping with her personal style and her manifest age, that it was a question whether she was not better worth looking at than the freshest beauty in her teens. Girlhood is a very pretty and a very charming thing, no doubt, but girlhood, even in its brightest and sweetest form, has never been able and will never be able to hold its own, with any moderate measure of success, against the charm of a woman who, instead of fading, has ripened into maturity; and whose personal gifts have gained the toning and expression that only time can bestow. It is not often that we see the warm zenith of feminine loveliness attained—for there are many dwarfing and blighting influences at work in almost every woman's life, that send her into the port of middle age, shattered, if not wrecked—but a glimpse of it is vouchsafed to us sometimes, and we are richer for that glimpse to the end of our lives. It is something inexpressibly graceful and beautiful, something that has no jar or clang of discordance in it, something that is refined to the exquisite point of needing no further refinement, and something which was breathed like an aroma over the woman who came forward now. She was certainly a beautiful woman. Her delicate features were chiselled with the clearness and regularity of sculpture, her rich brown hair was abundant as any *chevelure* of twenty, and had a glow upon it which proved conclusively that the art of the dyer had never been called into requisition; her violet eyes had lost not a tint of their color, during the half-century that had passed over them; and her slender, symmetrical figure bore itself with a dignity which seemed to add at least two inches to her real stature. General Aylmer had been right in saying that he would easily have recognized Julian Romney by his likeness to his mother; yet, alike as the two faces were in cast of feature, there was a difference between them, which, resting in diverse expression, sometimes deepened into positive dissimilarity. It could scarcely have been otherwise, since the younger face was mobile to excess—the lip ever ready to curl, the brow ever ready to bend—while the elder was locked in the passionlessness of marble. The finely-arched

brow seldom met in any frown; the cold, calm lip rarely smiled; and, whatever strength of passion or capability of emotion existed in the depths of this woman's nature, she had long since placed a strong curb over—a curb that gave a repressed quietude to her manner, and was the cause of a certain repulsion, which more than one person confessed to experiencing when under her influence. Yet few people have been more universally admired, or more justly commended; and, as she crossed the floor in her rich silk and soft laces, Valerie acknowledged, for perhaps the fiftieth time, that, when her grandfather chose a second wife, his taste, in beauty at least, had been irreproachable.

"What!—you down?" she said, as she came forward, and perceived the occupant of the sofa. "I doubt if it was prudent to walk on your foot, yet a while, Valerie. You should have been carried down, as the doctor advised."

"Fanchette and Rose helped me," said Valerie. "I scarcely walked at all."

"Fanchette and Rose could not give all the assistance you must have needed. Your grandfather was just speaking of taking Maurice up to bring you down."

"That would have been more imposing, certainly, but not more to my taste," said Valerie, with a laugh. "I had a suspicion of that plan of grandpapa's, so I was all the more anxious to steal a march on him. Besides, I really was dreadfully tired of my room and my novels."

"I don't wonder at it," said the elder lady, as she sat down in a high-backed Gothic chair, which made her look more like a picture than ever, and drew forward an embroidery-frame. "Needle-work has quite gone out of fashion, I believe," she went on, "or I should think you would have found that a pleasanter as well as a more profitable occupation."

"Do you mean hemming handkerchiefs or embroidering ottomans?" asked Valerie, more flippantly than was quite proper; but the temptation to rejoinder was strong, and liking, between this handsome lady and herself, there had never been enough to insure an amicable *tête-à-tête*. "Fanchette relieves me of the first, and, as for the other, I don't belong to any charitable association; so I should have no means of disposing of them after they were finished."

"If you have no room for them at Aylmers, your friends might like them as souvenirs," said Madame Vacquant, whose sneers were never apparent on the surface. "You are so well provided with friends, that there would be no difficulty about finding recipients. I hope, by-the-way, you left Miss Fane quite well?"

"Quite well," Valerie answered, with a saucy sparkle in her eyes. "It is kind of you to inquire about Netta, for I know you do not like her; but then that is not singular. I believe we all failed to please you in our poor Louisiana."

"The climate did not agree with me," said Madame Vacquant, quietly; "otherwise, I had no fault to find. The fruits are delicious, and the people charmingly hospitable. But I really think I should have died if I had remained, the lassitude and prostration were so great. I don't wonder that women there fade early—or that you have gone off so much, Valerie."

"I never knew that women faded earlier there than elsewhere," returned Valerie, nonchalantly. "And, as for my going off, I know I am hideous just now; but I have Baltimore to thank for that. When I left home, everybody said I was looking remarkably well."

"People who see one constantly are not always the best judges of one's looks," said Madame Vacquant. "Perhaps, after you have been in Maryland a while, you may recover something of your bloom. You used to have a very bright complexion."

"One needs to come to Maryland to hear unflattering truths," Valerie answered, with undiminished good-humor. "Nobody in Louisiana ever spoke of my complexion in the past tense; but then probably our standard is not a good one. I may be able to do something toward improving it when I go back. Are not those the gentlemen's voices? How soon they leave the table!"

"Your grandfather does not like to sit long," said Madame Vacquant, pausing in her work to listen; "and Julian, I know, has

an engagement for this evening. That is Maurice Darcy speaking now. You have not met him yet, I believe?"

"Not unless you consider my fainting escapade in the light of a meeting. He must be very strong; for I weigh a great deal, and—"

The opening of the door cut short her sentence; and the next moment, her father, accompanied by a tall, stalwart stranger, entered the room. They were speaking together as they crossed the floor, and did not notice her presence for an instant; then General Aylmer looked round, and was not a little suprised.

"You here, Valerie!" he said. "How did you manage to get down? Your grandfather has just gone up-stairs to see you."

"I am very sorry," said Valerie, with more contrition than was perhaps sincere. "But, you see, I meant to surprise him, and —won't you please call him back, papa?"

"He will soon find that the bird has flown," answered the general, coolly. "Meanwhile, have you forgotten Captain Darcy?"

Valerie looked up at his companion. Even despite the disadvantage under which she had seen it before, she thought she would have recognized again the face that had gazed at her through the mist of past suffering. But she must have been mistaken —for, if she had appreciated one-half of its compassionate kindness on that day, she could scarcely have spoken with as much coldness as when she answered:

"No, I have not forgotten Captain Darcy, and I am glad to be able to thank him for his assistance and strength, when I needed both sadly. Without them, I don't know how I should ever have found myself in the house that day."

"I only hope you are better," said Captain Darcy, speaking very courteously, but making no effort to shake hands or any thing of the kind. "It is a pity that your arrival in Baltimore should have been so disagreeably signalized."

"I don't know about its being disagreeable," she answered, carelessly. "I have had several days to myself, and I have read many entertaining and a few instructive books; and both of these novelties are worth the price of a sprain, I dare say. Oh, I am always philosophical—am I not, papa? Eugene used to declare that, if the house were burned down, I would say at once that it was the pleasantest thing imaginable, since trees and grass were a great deal more healthful and comfortable than roofs and floors. I must not quote Eugene, however, for here comes grandpapa."

M. Vacquant entered as she spoke—a little out of breath, and a good deal out of humor.

"What is the meaning of this, Valerie?" he asked, quite injuredly. "I thought you could not walk, so I go up-stairs to see you, and am coolly informed that you have gone down! Did you time your descent exactly for the purpose of giving me a useless journey? By Jove, how tired I am!"

"So you have taken to swearing in English!" Valerie laughed, as he sat down by her. "No, I didn't time my descent for any reason of the kind," she went on. "I came down to give you a pleasant surprise, and this is all the thanks I get. I wonder you are not ashamed to be so ungrateful."

"So that's the light, is it?" said he, with a shrug. "Well, I'll make apologies, when I recover breath enough. Meanwhile, let us hear whom you were quoting when I came in."

"Nobody you care about," said Valerie, giving his hand an affectionate little pinch. "I was only quoting my hero, my darling, my soldier of fortune, my—"

"Oh, Eugene," said he, in a very unenthusiastic tone.

"Yes, Eugene. What have you to say against him?"

"Only that I hope he has not been fished out of the Seine in a starving condition yet."

"Tell him about him," said Valerie, turning triumphantly to her father, and getting decidedly aground among her personal pronouns. "Tell him all that we heard last about the dear boy: how well he is doing; and how steady he is; and how much everybody likes him; and—"

"And how ready you are to believe it all," said M. Vacquant, stopping her mouth with peremptory good-humor. "I don't want to hear any thing about the scamp!

If he had stayed at home, and turned shoeblack, now, I might have forgiven him; but, to go off and join the *condottieri!*"

"I thought you liked *condottieri*, grandpapa," said Valerie, and her eyes turned more significantly than she intended toward Captain Darcy, who was standing beside Madame Vacquant, and who caught the glance at once.

"I don't know why you thought so," said her grandfather. "I like them so little, that Maurice and I have had more than one disagreement on the subject."

"Captain Darcy likes them, then?" said Valerie, making an ill-judged assault on the enemy's lines.

"That depends upon whether you mean *condottieri* in the literal or the social sense," answered Captain Darcy for himself.

"In the social sense, undoubtedly," returned she, promptly.

"Then I don't like them in the least," he answered. "But, in the literal sense, it would be strange if I had not at least a sympathy for them, since I belong to a race that for the last three hundred years has furnished soldiers of fortune to the whole world."

"And liked nothing better!" said M. Vacquant. "Deuce take the fellow!—he'd be a free lance to-morrow, if he could!"

"He was a free lance yesterday," said General Aylmer, with a smile. "We must not forget that."

Darcy turned away, and walked down the room. General Aylmer followed him, and, while they stood together, in a broad glow of light, Valerie had no better occupation for her eyes than to note the appearance of this soldier-artist who had been advanced to the dignity of kinship with her.

This was all that she saw—a tall, well-built figure, whose deep, broad chest, and lithe, sinewy limbs, were pleasant sights for people who had a *penchant* in the way of manly strength or manly prowess — and whose stalwart, well-carried shoulders looked as if they could have borne the very burden of Atlas without blench or quiver; a face that suited the figure excellently well for it was frank and bold, more soldierly than artistic, and only moderately handsome. Indeed, as Valerie regarded it from behind the friendly shelter of M. Vacquant, she did not think it handsome at all. Certainly there was wonderfully little of the *petit-maître* or trim gallant about it—little to please the eye that admired Charley Hautaine's insouciant grace, or Julian Romney's ideal beauty—but a good deal, nevertheless, that many women, as well as many men, liked to look upon. There were straight, clearly-cut features, deep, dark-gray eyes that might have been handsome, if they had not been too cold and critical; a mouth that was somewhat set and stern, under the thick chestnut mustache; the square, belligerent chin, that mars the beauty of many a born fighter's face; the broad artist-brow, that is never wholly without attraction, and an abundant amount of crisp chestnut hair. Together with these things, there was a striking absence of that which, for want of a better name, we may call the conventional stamp—the stamp that in these days squares and trims everybody and every thing into conventional shape—and a striking presence of fresh and vigorous individuality. The man had his faults—they were written, indeed, on his very face—but you felt more than half-inclined to forgive them all, in gratitude for the novelty of seeing one who looked, moved, and spoke, not according to certain social rules and canons, but according to the exigence of the hour and the need of the minute; yet who never, in even the faintest shade of word, look, or tone, violated that higher law of perfect courtesy which is the flower of true refinement. The man *was* a man, but he was also a gentleman, and none the less the first for being so entirely the last. You could see at once that he was frank and straightforward to a fault, formed for action rather than for diplomacy, very apt to clear his way with clean, even strokes, and little likely to show tolerance in any case of attempted wiles; but you also felt sure that he was a man who would be gentle to the weak, and tender to those whom he loved, with the supreme gentleness and tenderness that are born of strength. Nevertheless, let it not be sup

posed that there was any thing of the Titan, or the genius, or the hero, about him. He was simply a man who had some of the best attributes of common manhood stamped upon him—the courage and simplicity, the generosity and faithfulness, the scorn of all things base, and the very unconsciousness of all things mean, which are *uncommon* enough, Heaven knows, but which go further to make up our idea of true manhood than all the polish or all the learning of all the schools.

"He looks like a free companion," Valerie thought to herself, while Madame Vacquant described the manner in which hair was dressed, and dilated upon the latest style of bonnet. "I wonder if the soldiers of the Irish brigade at Fontenoy were men of this kind? If so, no wonder the English — Yes, madame, I think that must have been a lovely bonnet; but you know I could not wear any thing of the sort. Pearl and blue would make a fright of me."

"No; of course you could not," said Madame Vacquant. "I was only describing it. You always have scarlet somewhere about your bonnets, I believe."

"A knot of scarlet roses, or perhaps a cluster of fuchsias," said Valerie, who was not a whit behind the most of her sex in devotion to the toilet. "I like fuchsias—they are so graceful and becoming.—Grandpapa, I wonder if Captain Darcy had any ancestors at the battle of Fontenoy?"

"I don't know, I am sure," said M. Vacquant. "What on earth put that into your head?"

"Nothing," she laughed; and then she hummed under her breath, to an impromptu air:

"'On Fontenoy, on Fontenoy, nor ever yet elsewhere,
Rushed on to fight a nobler band than those proud exiles were.'"

"You must try and get down to Easter's, to-morrow," Madame Vacquant went on. "There is a silk there, I am sure you will like. I saw it a week ago, and told them to put it aside; but such people are so unreliable. It is a lovely gold-color; and under black lace—you still have that overdress of Spanish lace, I suppose, Valerie?"

"Oh, yes," said Valerie; "of course I have it yet—such things as that are heir-looms, you know. I need a silk for it, too; and I shall certainly get the gold-color, if it is pretty; but then, I have no doubt of that.

'On Fontenoy, on Fontenoy, like eagles in the sun'—

What's the next line, grandpapa?"

"I never heard the thing, Valerie."

"Oh, of course you have—only you've forgotten:

'Like lions leaping at a fold, when mad with hunger's pang,
Right up against the English line the Irish exiles sprang:
Bright was their steel—'"

The battle of Fontenoy came to an abrupt end just here, for the door opened, and a radiant vision entered—to wit, Julian Romney, in full evening costume. He entered listlessly, with something of a fretful cloud on his face; but a single glance at the sofa was enough to dispel it, and the next moment he came forward, smiling brightly.

"Miss Aylmer! What an unexpected pleasure this is! But why was I not allowed my share in the triumph of bringing you down?"

"There was no triumph in the matter,' Valerie said, with a laugh. "I came down very quietly, assisted only by Fanchette and Rose."

"When?"

"While you were all at dinner."

"While we were at dinner—and I just to know it!"

"It has not been long."

"It has been long enough to make me wish that Mrs. Jennings and her party were both in Halifax; or that I had looked in the drawing-room when I came up-stairs. How could I have been so obtuse as not to know by instinct that you were here? Don't laugh, Miss Aylmer—it is a very serious matter, I assure you."

Miss Aylmer did laugh, however. His petulance and vexation seemed so little more than that of a spoiled child; and there was so much of the "pretty page" about him, that she felt half-inclined to extend her hand and caress the curl-bedecked head. A timely recollection of propriety interfered, however; and she only shook her own as she answered:

"Your flatteries deserve a pleasanter reward than any thing they have missed, or are likely to gain. My mirror tells me that I never looked worse, and my conscience assures me that I never felt more stupid."

"For the peace of our city, don't look any better, then," said he, with only a half-tone of jest. "And as for stupidity—pity mine, when I have not yet inquired about your ankle. Is it well enough for you to walk at all?"

"I think not," answered she, with a dubious glance toward it. "But really, I have not tried. I limped down on one foot; for I have such a vivid remembrance of my agony the other day, that I did not have the courage to put this one on the floor."

"You ought to do it," however, said Madame Vacquant. "Your ankle will never grow strong again unless you use it. Is not that so, my dear?"

"Certainly it is so," said M. Vacquant; "but *petite* knows best. She can judge whether it feels equal to the exertion yet."

"I am by no means sure of that," said Julian, while *petite* herself looked doubtful. "Suppose you try to walk?" he added, turning abruptly to the latter. "I am confident your ankle is strong enough by this time to bear the exertion. Come! let me assist you."

He held out his hand, but Valerie shook her head.

"Not this evening—to-morrow, perhaps," she said.

"To-morrow I may not be able to help you," answered he. "Pray, try now—if only a few steps. I should like to feel that I was making some amends for allowing that dreadful fall."

"Allowing! How could you have prevented it?"

He only smiled, and held out his hand again. "Will you not try? Just a few steps."

He looked so imploring, and so handsome, that for once Valerie developed an incapacity to say no.

"If you will not insist, in case it hurts me," she began.

She was interrupted by protestations and assurances to the contrary; so, after a moment, she slowly brought the injured foot to the floor, and tried its strength, before rising.

"Does it hurt?" asked M. Vacquant.

"N—o. Mr. Romney was right, I believe. It scarcely hurts at all—as yet. Now I will try to walk."

"Let me call Maurice to assist you also," said her grandfather, in a tone which was unluckily loud enough to reach Captain Darcy's ears. He started and turned, just in time to hear Valerie say with decision:

"No; certainly not. Mr. Romney wil assist me; and, if I need any one else, I can call papa."

Then she laid her hand on Julian's arm, and, thus supported, walked slowly down the room.

"Take care. Don't over-exert your ankle," said General Aylmer, turning round as she advanced. "How does it feel?"

"Very well indeed," she answered. "I am ashamed to remember how cowardly I have been about trying it.—No, Mr. Romney, you need not turn back; I think I will walk down the next room."

"Had you not better be cautious?" asked Darcy. "Your foot must be weak yet."

"Of course it is weak; and that's the reason I want to strengthen it," said she, lightly.—"Mr. Romney, I am sorry to lean so heavily. I hope my weight is not very great."

Neither of the gentlemen heard Romney's reply, for he moved on before it was spoken; but they saw the light that came into his eyes, as he answered; and being, in different ways, men of the world, both shrugged their shoulders mentally.

"I must give Valerie warning that her favorite game won't answer here," thought her father. "Fooling this pretty-faced boy would be a trifling affair in itself; but making an enemy of his mother would ruin every thing."

"A thorough-paced coquette," thought Maurice Darcey; "and more ripe for mischief than even the most of her class. Poor Julian!"

Poor Julian was meanwhile leading his companion through one after the other of the suite of reception-rooms, until they

found themselves at the entrance of the conservatory.

"What a beautiful place!" Valerie said, pausing in the door, and gazing with loving eyes at the interior, where the luxuriant children of her fair South brought something of their tropical bloom and beauty about the chill existence of the North. "How exquisite the plants are!—But is not that a fountain I hear?"

Romney answered by leading her forward, and the next moment she saw that, almost immediately in the centre of the conservatory, a jet of water was playing in a marble basin, making a soft, fairy-like music of its own, and gleaming like a silver mist through the mellow gloom. All around it broad-leaved water-plants were arranged with unusual taste and skill; while the most rare of the flowering shrubs were clustered in the immediate neighborhood, and tall, feathery crests nodded, or seemed to nod, in the dimmer background.

This time Valerie did not exclaim, "What a beautiful place!" She only felt a sharp throb, half-exquisite pleasure, half-exquisite pain, which all forms of the beautiful bring to some organizations; and then she said softly, "It looks like home."

"I am glad I was the first person to bring you here, then," said Romney, quickly. "I am glad that the place which reminds you of home, must also remind you a little of me. Sit down. You must rest before you try to go back."

There was every thing to second the request; so Valerie yielded without much demur. "We cannot stay long, or they will miss us," she said, hesitatingly; and, having cleared her conscience by this remark, she sat down and gave herself up to the charm of the spot. The soft lamps glimmered so far away that they threw only a sort of moonlight radiance through the heavy tropical foliage; the brilliant blossoms of the Southern flora were blooming on every side, and their rich, subtle fragrance was heavy on the air; the water rose and fell with the measured rhythm that in itself lulled to quiescence; and so, while the party, a few rooms distant, sat down to whist, counted their tricks, and scored their honors, these two lingered and yet lingered in what seemed, to one of them at least, a fairy-land.

Ah, it is a subtler and a deeper question than many of us think, that of determining whether the women who are gifted with the fatal gift which we call fascination, are strictly accountable for all the harm and evil this woful charm may work upon others. There are some women—we do not usually meet more than one in a lifetime—whose simplest tones and most careless glances contain more of magic than all the philters ever compounded by cunning necromancers—women whose powers no man has ever been wise enough to define, and few, very few, strong enough to resist; women than whom hundreds are fairer, and nobler, and wittier; but to whom Nature has given one dower that only Nature can bestow—the rare and perilous dower of being all things to all men. Now, are such women morally accountable for all the pain, the suffering, and the harm, which—unwittingly often—they never fail to cause? Are their white hands stained with the blood which has flowed for them, the pangs that have been endured, the lives wrecked, the curses breathed? Surely, if so, we might be more willing to accept the guilt of that poor wretch whom they are leading yonder down the long sunlit road toward the high hill where, tall and dark, one sombre outline cuts against the sky; him whose pale lips are even now moving in agonized prayer; and whom the great surging multitude will hungrily watch when the cord is drawn around his neck, and he goes from man's justice to the bar of God's mercy.

There is more point in this digression than is at once apparent. We are told that, in a matter of this kind, guilt or innocence is all a case of "intention." This seems hard, sometimes—hard that the instigator may go scot-free of penalty, while the victim bears the weight of sin, as well as of suffering; but, after all, who can draw the line of that "intention?" Who of us does not know

> "That evil is wrought by want of thought,
> As well as by want of heart?"

And who of us can believe that want of

thought will plead our excuse in the awful Reckoning, when every idle word will rise up against us? One thing at least is certain: in after-days it will go hard with Valerie Aylmer if her conscience be not clear of all intention to modulate her tones so well, to sheathe her glances so soft, and to let kindness—plain and simple kindness only, she would tell you—dwell in every word on that night when Julian Romney sat by her side, and found his fate in her eyes.

Found his fate! That is a term of which romantic school-girls are very fond; and, like as not, it may sound absurdly exaggerated to the men and women of the day, who sneer at human passion as they sneer at every thing else on the earth beneath, and in the heavens above the earth; but, for all that, there *is* such a thing yet, and will be such a thing, as long as women are beguilers and men are beguiled. Whether the term be correct or not—whether or not, in the fullest sense, Julian Romney found his fate in Valerie Aylmer's eyes—the sequel may show; but at least something of the fact began to be apparent to herself before the evening was over. After the last good-nights had been exchanged, and when the fair Southern head laid itself down upon its pillows, a vision came back of the beautiful boyish face that had kindled and glowed so warmly during those hours beside the fountain—the face that just then was close to that of a blond belle in the *valse à deux temps*, and which saw before it, not the golden curls and azure eyes of sweet Violate Arle, but the lips which were even then murmuring:

"Poor boy! I must try and not do him any harm."

CHAPTER III.

THE GENERAL GIVES A WARNING.

No one was very much surprised the next morning when the door of the breakfast-room opened, and Miss Aylmer made her appearance, looking so blooming and bright in a rich crimson cashmere, that even Madame Vacquant felt inclined to doubt whether the climate of Louisiana was quite as injurious to complexions as she had supposed. The young lady received her congratulations and greetings very quietly; then, subsiding into a chair by Romney, she bade him tell her how the night had gone in the way of the Jennings's party.

"Heavily enough, as far as I was concerned," he answered. "Other people seemed to be enjoying themselves in usual degree; but I never found an evening more hopelessly dull. I am glad you have come down to give us a glimpse of your face this morning; otherwise, I should have carried a nightmare about with me all day."

"What was so dreadful?" asked his step-father—"the wine, the women, or the music?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders petulantly.

"How can I tell? It was all a hideous conglomeration of sight and sound—so hideous, that the wine might have been gooseberry, the women dressed in bunting, and the band playing a dead-march, for aught I knew, or cared, to the contrary!"

"Oh, we understand," said the elder gentleman. "The fault being in yourself—as it generally is—Mrs. Jennings's entertainment must bear the blame. It strikes me that, instead of saying 'the evening was dull,' you should have said 'I was dull,' and stated the matter more fairly."

"Doesn't it come to the same thing?" asked Valerie; for her quick eye caught the sudden cloud that came over Julian's face.

"By no means," her grandfather answered. "Here's Maurice, for instance, who, not being given to morbid fancies, enjoyed himself, I will venture to say, like a sensible man.—How was it, *mon ami?*—am I not right?"

Darcy looked up from a newspaper—both General Aylmer and himself had drawn back from the table, and were engaged, one with the *Gazette*, and the other with the *Sun*—but did not seem to need any information about the subject under discussion.

"I thought the evening went off very well," he said; "but, then, I'm never hard

to please, you know. Julian certainly must have found a bitter savor in every thing, for not the melancholy Jacques himself could have looked more wearied. I heard more than one 'bright-eyed *bonnibelle*' ask what misfortune had befallen him."

He spoke carelessly, but in a tone of good-humored pleasantry, that did not at all justify Romney's sharp retort:

"I am glad you found so much time to observe my proceedings, and I am sorry I can't return the compliment by bearing personal testimony to yours. I only remember that one 'bright-eyed *bonnibelle*' at least could have made no inquiry about me—the one, I mean, whom you engrossed the greater part of the evening."

"Who was that?" asked Madame Vacquant, speaking for the first time since she bade Valerie good-morning.

"I suppose he means Miss Rivière," said Darcy, with a smile. "She was looking charmingly last night, and I danced with her several times; but I should hardly have thought that made out a case of engrossing."

"Rivière!" Valerie repeated. "That is a Louisiana name."

"These are Louisiana people," said M. Vacquant.—"Aylmer, you remember Henry Rivière, I am sure."

"Perfectly," said the general, looking up. "And, by-the-way, his is one of the worst cases of utter smash I know of."

"So I supposed; for he is here in business."

The other raised his eyebrows with an expression of surprise.

"Rivière! If it were possible to be astonished by any thing, these days, I should certainly think you must be mistaken. I can fancy him connected with every thing in the world except business. By-the-by, that is a very indefinite term, and means any thing, from ship-owning to shoemaking. What does it stand for in this case?"

"Some banking position or other, I think. He seems to be getting on tolerably; and is clever enough to succeed very well, if he will only keep away from race-courses, and let cards and dice alone."

"Ah! if he only can," said the general, in a tone of profound incredulity concerning the probability of any thing of the kind. And then he went back to the *Sun*.

"Has he a daughter, and is her name Alix?" Valerie inquired.

"He has a daughter, and her name is Alix," Romney replied. "She has made something of a sensation here. Do you mean to say you know her?"

"I met her once or twice—not oftener, for she was very young, and not in society—but I remember that I thought her very attractive. Is she not very *petite*, with soft brown eyes, and shy, caressing manners?"

"And a color that comes and goes twenty times in a minute—exactly. She is said to be very charming; but Darcy there has cultivated her more than I have, and can speak with better knowledge."

"She is one of the most thoroughly natural and thoroughly attractive people I ever knew," said Darcy, warmly. "I sincerely congratulate you, Miss Aylmer, on the discovery of such a friend."

"Such an acquaintance," Madame Vacquant corrected. "Valerie did not speak of her as a friend—did you, my dear? I should be sorry, if so, for I have heard one or two rumors about her, which, if true, make her rather undesirable even as an acquaintance."

"One or two rumors about Miss Rivière!" said Darcy, quickly. "Excuse me, madame, if I ask what they are—for nothing could possibly be true that would render her an undesirable acquaintance for Miss Aylmer."

"Excuse me for not remembering that she had such a warm champion at hand," said the lady, smiling, though not very pleasantly; "and moderate your warmth, my dear Maurice, for I meant nothing in the least dreadful. I have heard that Miss Rivière is studying music, with a view to going on the stage—that is all. But I am sure you will agree with me that it is enough to justify what I said. Valerie would scarcely care to make a friend of a future cantatrice."

"That would depend very much upon circumstances, or, rather upon the person

in question," said Valerie, coolly. "Now I should make a friend of Alix Rivière, not of the future cantatrice—if the rumor is true."

"Let us hope that it is not," said M. Vacquant, lifting up his spoon to break an egg, and balancing it in the air as he spoke. "In my opinion, it is one of the worst signs of the times that the new generation begin to throw off so many of the old traditions of gentle blood, and to disregard so entirely the old *noblesse-oblige* theory of gentle birth," he went on. "Equality and fraternity are vile enough in a political sense; but the devil himself could not imagine any thing worse than their social enforcement would be! Yet all these latter-day notions are paving the way for little else. We are told that it is a very fine thing to be liberal; that a gentleman may be a gentleman, though he turn blacksmith; and a lady may continue a lady though she becomes an actress; that good ancestry is of no account; and a good name worth exactly what it will bring at the bottom of a check! I may be illiberal," continued he, bringing down his spoon with a crash into the egg-shell, "but I don't see the force of such reasoning, and I have an unmitigated contempt for such practice!"

"Don't excite youself, grandpapa," Valerie laughed. "And, besides, I don't see the force of your reasoning in the present case. There are no better people in Louisiana than the Rivières."

"So much the more cause for their not forgetting the fact," said he. "However, we'll be charitable. The rumor about the young lady may not be true. I am sure I hope it is not, since I don't know a more charming woman than her mother.—Maurice, have you forgotten that you promised to attend Cox's sale of horses for me this morning?"

"Not in the least, sir," Darcy answered, pushing aside the *Gazette*, and giving a glance at his watch; "but there is plenty of time yet, and General Aylmer spoke of going with me."

"I am at your service," said the general, rising as he spoke. "It has been my life-long practice to keep no man waiting my business or pleasure, and I should be sorry to begin at this late day."

"Remember that, from two such judges of horse-flesh, I shall expect a simply unparalleled span," said M. Vacquant, as they turned to leave the room.

"It would have been wiser to send them apart, then," said Romney, after the two gentlemen were safely out of ear-shot. "Together, their opinions are sure to clash—I never knew two jockeys who didn't—and the result may be any thing but the one you desire."

"I should have sent you along as umpire," said the step-father, a little shortly. "Your judgment served you so well when you bought that showy-looking animal the other week, which turned out just as sound as Maurice prophesied."

Julian's cheek flushed darkly, and his brow contracted in its quick frown. There could not possibly have been found a sorer point with him than the one to which M. Vacquant alluded—a certain equine purchase against which Darcy had strongly advised him, and which proved to be utterly worthless. His reply would probably not have been very temperate, if his mother had not interfered.

"You are hard on poor Julian," she said, reproachfully, to her husband. "I am sure he will give Captain Darcy all the credit he deserves as a jockey; and as for that unlucky horse—isn't he ever to be left in peaceful disgrace?"

"With all my heart," said M. Vacquant, good-humoredly.—"I beg pardon, Julian, if I have said any thing to wound your feelings; and we'll certainly let that deposed czar rest on his laurels.—Are you engaged this morning, my dear, or can you write some letters for me? There's quite an accumulation of them up-stairs, and the gout in my hand is worse than ever."

"Let me be your secretary, grandpapa," Valerie said; but, to her surprise, Madame Vacquant interposed at once.

"Quite impossible. Your grandfather is accustomed to me, and I understand his business. You would only incommode him, and tire yourself. I shall turn you over to Julian for an hour or two, and as soon as I

give some directions to Pierre, I will be in the library, my dear."

"I am in no haste," said M. Vacquant; then, gathering together several letters which had arrived that morning, he left the room.

Madame Vacquant followed him almost immediately; and, thus forsaken, Miss Aylmer and Mr. Romney looked at each other and smiled.

"You are given into my hands for amusement," said the latter. "Will you tell the humblest of your slaves what diversion will please you best?"

"In the first place, I should like to know something of the house I inhabit," she answered. "Do you feel inclined to play cicerone? It may involve another offer of your arm, for my foot is not strong yet."

"To hear is to obey, if it involved the offer of my head Shall we set out at once?"

"Yes, certainly."

She rose and walked slowly down the room. By the time the door was reached, his arm had been offered and accepted; and then they set forth, as gayly as a pair of children, on a thorough tour of inspection.

It was certainly a very pleasant one. --Beautiful and luxurious appointments, breadth of space, and comfort, unspoiled by economy of arrangement, are charming things to almost any one; and, although the residence of M. Vacquant was by no means extravagantly "palatial," a cultivated and refined taste had breathed into it an individuality of aspect which the most gorgeous upholstery rather diminishes than increases. Velvet carpets, damask curtains, tables and ottomans, even pictures and statues, have their money value, and are at the command of the most uncultured buyer; but the knowledge how to use these things is a different commodity, and by no means marketable. Whatever else she may have lacked, Madame Vacquant plainly did not lack this —the rare knowledge and rarer artistic appreciation which are the very first proofs of *savoir vivre*, that a hostess, aspiring to raise her head above the level of ordinary hostesses, must give. The most exacting sybarite could hardly have found fault with the arrangement of the rooms, the very air of which inspired thoughts of social ease and social pleasure; and the most sensitive artist could scarcely have suggested a multiplication or abstraction of the well-chosen and well-hung pictures, the costly bronzes, the exquisite statues, or the treasures of ormolu and *marqueterie*, that occupied unobtrusive corners, and conducted themselves in all respects like ordinary furniture.

When the whole lower floor had been explored, Valerie led her companion back to the music-room, and bade him open the piano.

"I am sure you sing," she said, when he had obeyed; "and, if you please, I want to hear you. Ah, there is no good in denial I flatter myself I know a little of physiognomy; and, if yours is not a musical face, I never saw one; besides, you have lived in Germany."

"That settles the matter, does it?" said Romney, laughing a little. "Of course, I know something of music—we all did at Jena—but nothing you will care to hear."

"Let me be judge of that," she answered. "Run your hand over the keys. Ah, yes!—I knew you had a good touch. Do you play much?"

"Scarcely at all. Singing is my strong point."

"Sing, then."

Transcribed, those two words look rather curt; but, given with the expression that Miss Aylmer knew excellently well how to infuse—the half-persuasive, half-commanding accent which she possessed to perfection—few men would have hesitated longer than Romney did about obeying.

He smiled slightly, modulated a few chords, by way of prelude, and began one of those artfully-simple German ballads that the poetry of Uhland and the music of Mendelssohn have made familiar to every ear. The harmonization of the melody was so perfect that, for some moments, Valerie scarcely noticed the voice that rendered it; then, all at once, the consciousness flashed upon her that she had never heard a purer tenor, and, notwithstanding her previously expressed opinion concerning the musical face, she felt herself completely taken by surprise. The natural power, sweetness,

and compass of the voice, were remarkable; and as the result, perhaps, of good training, the style was almost perfect—being only sometimes a little strained and marred by a few florid exaggerations. They were very few, however; and, on the whole, his vocalization did such entire credit to himself, that Valerie had no disposition to find fault, but sat in a state of enjoyment which was all the greater for being unexpected, while the rich, clear tones floated on, full and even, to the last cadence. When he finished, she looked up at him reproachfully.

"I suppose people never do tell the truth about their own performances," she said; "but that you should speak of singing 'a little,' seems to me sacrilege, or, worse yet, affectation."

"Let us consider it sacrilege, then, by all means," he answered. "One aim of my life has been to steer clear of the odium of affectation, and I think I have partially succeeded. People don't often call me affected—unless I forget myself far enough to be natural."

"Now you are trying to be cynical."

"On my honor, no. Nothing suits me less. And, seriously, I am more pleased than I can say, if you like my singing."

"Like it? You must know how weak that expression is—you must know that it is beautiful! Sing something else."

"What shall it be?"

"Some of your student-songs, if you remember any of them—with a drinking chorus, and all that sort of thing. I have always been curious to hear how they go."

"They go delightfully when you have a hundred or two voices in the chorus, the beer-cans, and the hurrahs; but how they will sound in solo I can hardly imagine. Nevertheless, you shall hear."

And, suiting the action to the word, he burst into one of the ringing student songs that seemed to embody in every note the freshness and enthusiasm, the mirth and daring, the gayety and earnestness, of that wonderful Young Germany whose spontaneous outbursts they were, and whose national lyrics they have become. He threw himself into it with a force that was electrifying, and to his listener's ear left nothing to be desired—even in the chorus, where he stopped to assure her that the clashing of wine-cups and swords was necessary, as well as the volume of united voices. "If you could only hear 'The Sword-song' given in that way," he said, when he finished, and she was expressing her approbation— "Körner's, of course, I mean—and Schiller's 'Trooper's song.' You have heard that, I suppose." And he dashed into it as he spoke:

"'Up, comrades, and saddle! To horse and away,
To the field where freedom's the prize, sirs!
There hearts of true metal still carry the day,
And men are the kings and the kaisers!'"

When the end came, he gave her no time for comment, but rose at once from the piano-seat.

"I have done my share," he said; "now it is your turn."

But Valerie shook her head.

"I don't sing often," she replied—"never in cold blood and broad daylight. Lower the curtains, light the gas, fill the rooms, put me at a fever-heat of social excitement, and I may sing for you perhaps moderately well; otherwise, I cannot think of such a thing."

"What shall we do, then?"

"Is it absolutely necessary for us to do any thing? I like sitting still very well—especially when my ankle pains."

"Does it pain now?"

"Yes, a little—but pray don't look so much concerned. It will soon be better. If you want to make yourself entertaining, you may tell me something about Jena. You can't imagine what a fancy I have always had for German student-life!"

There could be no doubt of the fact that Miss Aylmer's popularity was very easily to be accounted for. By the bright waters and over the fair fields of their own favorite pursuit, or best-loved hobby, she led her willing victims; giving to each the sweet smile and vivid interest that rarely flagged under any infliction, or had been known to falter in any emergency. It puzzled ordinary people—people who had none of this gift themselves—to imagine how she could possibly adapt herself so readily to so many diverse minds and diverse tastes; but the

truth really was, that half of it was done unconsciously. It was not that she meant to do it, or even wished to do it; but simply that she could not help doing it. It was her birthright—this chameleon-power of variation, this capability of tuning herself, as it were, to so many keys—and she could no more have explained her own *modus operandi* than the most puzzled among the lookers-on. It came natural to her. That was all she knew about the matter. It was the fairy gold which some elfin-power, more malicious than kind, had left beside her cradle; and she scattered it abroad with a lavish unconsciousness of its value—thinking only, caring only, that it won for her the homage which had never yet been missing from her path, and which she thought it would not be possible to live without. Sometimes, when she looked most interested, she was, in truth, dreadfully bored; but kindness of heart, as well as the tactics of coquetry, had some effect in teaching her that smiling endurance which distinguishes the martyr of society, and both together bore her triumphantly through almost any ordeal. Neither kindness of heart nor the tactics of coquetry had much to do with the earnest attention which she paid Julian Romney, as he obeyed her last request to the letter, and told her a great deal of his "wandering youth in the far, fair, foreign lands." He talked well, in a picturesque, graphic way of his own, and might have engrossed a less interested listener. As he talked, she listened—ever with those eloquent eyes that said more than many words—until her father's voice made her start, and her father's presence suddenly appeared in the doorway.

Few people ever learned any thing from General Aylmer's face, but there were one or two signs known only to his daughter, and these told her at once that some serious concern was battling there with grave displeasure. Before she had time to indulge in a single conjecture, however, he advanced into the room, speaking quite as usual.

"Valerie, I am sorry to disturb you, but I have just received a telegram from New Orleans, which necessitates my immediate departure, and ."

"A telegram!"

It was no wonder that the bright cheek grew so pale, or that those two words broke almost unconsciously from the lips. Few feminine nerves came so intact out of the four years' agony, as not to quail at that fateful word; and then war had spared her a brother.

"Yes, a telegram," said her father, quietly; "but there is no need for being alarmed. It is only Gibson, who telegraphs to me on a matter of business—but I must go at once."

"You are sure it is nothing about Eugene, papa?"

"Perfectly sure. But you can see for yourself, if you desire."

He handed her the well-known form of the telegraph company, filled in with three or four written words. After reading them, her brow cleared wonderfully, and she looked up quite cheerfully.

"I suppose you must go, papa, since you and Mr. Gibson both think so; but it is very provoking. Can't you at least wait until to-morrow?"

"I can't wait an hour longer than the first train that leaves southward," the general answered, a little impatiently. "Will you come to my room with me for a few minutes? I have something to say to you."

Valerie knew her father better than to hesitate about complying with this request. She rose at once, and followed him upstairs.

Once there, the general closed the door, and plunged into his subject without preliminary.

"I have a very short time in which to say any thing, Valerie," he began; "so you need not be surprised, and I hope you will not be offended, if I speak plainly and forcibly. In the first place, I am very sorry to see that you have commenced a flirtation—or whatever else you choose to call it—with this young Romney."

Valerie started and colored, biting her lip half-angrily. She had expected to be taken to task, but not so soon, and not quite so abruptly. As it was, she was thrown off her guard, and could only take refuge in the thrice-commonplace—

"I don't understand you, sir."

"Pardon me," her father retorted, "but

I think you understand me perfectly. Perhaps you *don't* understand my reasons for alluding to this, however, so I had better explain them. I never interfere with your amusements, as you know; partly because I have seen that you are perfectly capable of conducting them yourself, and partly because you have never done any serious mischief that I am aware of. A few broken hearts, more or less, are of small importance; but let me tell you that you are playing here a heavier game than for a broken heart."

His voice changed with the last words, and deepened so much in earnestness, that Valerie looked at him in simple surprise. Once more she said—this time sincerely—

"I don't understand you."

The general answered by one, straightforward question:

"What do you propose to yourself by turning this boy's head?"

"Really, papa, I have no intention of turning his head."

"You have not? Well, then, I wonder you take such a direct means to do it. Come, come, I have no time for feminine fencing. You can answer that question to yourself, if you don't care to answer it to me; but I warn you, solemnly, that you had better stop short in the matter. If ever you played with fire in your life, you are playing with it now!"

Valerie looked up a little rebelliously.

"If you *will* say disagreeable things, papa, I really think you might express them more clearly. What are you afraid of? Surely, not that I will marry him?"

"No," answered her father, coolly, "you are too sensible for that. A pretty face is not likely to ensnare you, and I don't know that there is any thing else here. The boy seems a mere spoiled child, and is said to be very much given to gambling and dissipation besides. Your grandfather plainly does not like him; and you would entirely alienate him by such a choice. No, I am not afraid of your marrying him—you will be tired enough of your toy in less than a week; but the mischief will be done then."

"What mischief?"

The general was packing his trunk; but he suspended the operation to turn round and look at his daughter.

"I am afraid you are growing stupid, Valerie," he said, quietly. "Is it possible you do not see that, if you bring any harm or suffering to Julian Romney, you make a bitter and unscrupulous enemy of his mother?"

Miss Aylmer started—then recovered herself, and laughed a little.

"Why, we are growing quite melodramatic, papa. People don't have enemies these days; or, if they do, they take it out in saying spiteful things about one another. Madame Vacquant reached that interesting stage, as far as I am concerned, long ago, and I don't see what other harm she can do me."

"Then you know very little of the woman, or of her influence in this house," said her father, gravely. "She can harm you bitterly, in a hundred ways; if she has never done so before, it has been because her dislike was more passive than active. Make it active once, and you had better doubt that the sun is in the heavens than that she will work you ill."

"I don't see—"

"No," he interrupted, impatiently, "it is like a woman never to see, until too late for sight to be of any service. But, remember that I warn you!—remember, too, that this boy is of somewhat different metal than those you are accustomed to dealing with. If he blows out his brains—"

"Oh, papa, pray hush!"

"Why, you need not be surprised. He looks quite absurd enough to do it. Now, mark me: if you go on with this, it will be at your own risk, but it is next to impossible that the consequences should fall on yourself alone. What do you say? Will you promise me to let the young fellow alone?"

He asked the question somewhat doubtfully; but there was no hesitation in Valerie's reply. She looked up, and answered readily:

"Why did you not ask me that at once, papa, and spare yourself all this long tirade? Of course, I will promise. There's not the least difficulty about it; for I never meant any thing else than letting him alone. I al

most feel as if he were a child—quite as if I should take undue advantage of his youth and ignorance, if I made him fall in love with me. Is that all?"

"Not quite—" and here the general hesitated before going on: "by-the-way, you have not told me what you think of this Darcy."

"Is there any thing to think?" she asked, carelessly. "He seems to me quite a nonentity—muscular, perhaps, but certainly not interesting."

"Then you are a worse judge of character than I supposed," said her father, with some perceptible chagrin in his voice. "I confess I was in hopes you had estimated the man more justly. For myself, I was very agreeably disappointed in him—he is thoroughly a gentleman, and one of the most companionable men I have met in a long time."

"Ah, yes; but then you forget, papa, that you have horses and politics to talk about; while I have nothing—besides, he takes no notice of me."

"Whose fault is that?"

"Indeed, I don't know—mine perhaps. But I don't think it matters. I never appreciated the full absurdity of grandpapa's proposed arrangement, until I saw the object of it. He is a very good sort of person in his way, I suppose; but I laugh whenever I think of him as a lover."

The general looked grave.

"What are your objections to him?" he asked.

At which question, the demoiselle laughed gayly.

"Objections? Why I could not begin to remember them. Perhaps I had better sum them all up in one—I don't like him!"

"But you scarcely know him."

"*Qu'importe?* It is all the same. You won't credit it, papa, but these things are matters of instinct, not of reason. I could not tell you why it is that every thing Captain Darcy says and does impresses me disagreeably; but, the fact remains the fact, none the less."

She spoke very decidedly; and her father turned away, with grave displeasure in his face.

"You will live to regret all this, Valerie," he said. Then he rang the bell for his servant, and, taking the hint, Miss Aylmer left the room.

An hour or two afterward, the general took his departure, leaving, as his last words to his daughter, when he kissed her good-by—

"Remember your promise."

CHAPTER IV.

A WILFUL WOMAN.

In view of much that is to be told hereafter, it may be well to say now, that Miss Aylmer was perfectly sincere in making the aforesaid promise, nor less sincere in the intention to fulfil it. Even before her father's warning, she had begun to think that it might be as well to keep "hands off" Julian Romney; for she estimated none too strongly the undisciplined passion of which that mobile face was an index, and felt none too truly that of the "lightly-won, lightly-lost" philosophy, this nature was incapable—but after the general had delivered himself, she made a very decided resolution to steer clear of all possible danger or trouble in such a quarter; and, for a time, kept this resolution with a constancy that did her credit. It was something quite new, and something very tiresome, she found, to be all the time on her guard against making herself too attractive; but still she persevered in the face of all difficulties, and, by this perseverance, proved conclusively that, of the sin of wilful and deliberate coquetry, her hands were stainless. If, after a while, she yielded to the temptations held out by idleness and levity, and borne on to consequences grievous as any that follow upon premeditated wrong, at least it will be seen that she did not forfeit all claim to compassion, and that she may be allowed a place in the wide ranks of those who have learned, from bitter experience, that it is one thing to sow the seed, and another to reap the harvest; one thing to set a storm in motion, and another to quell it; one

thing to loosen a dam, and another to stop a flood; one thing to commit folly, and quite another to avert evil. If this story can be said to contain a moral, it may indeed be compressed into a few words just here: it may be defined as an attempt (not strikingly successful, perhaps) to show how the consequences of folly are often as great and wide-spread as the consequences of crime; how no one is so insignificant but that his most thoughtless derelictions of duty may prove fruitful of harm and suffering to many besides himself, and how one tiny pebble of wrong-doing, cast into the waters of human life, will widen into circle after circle, until human eyes lose sight of its farthest vibration.

For some time after the general's departure, matters went on very smoothly, Valerie played her new *rôle*, if not to perfection, at least very creditably; and there were no more charmed *tête-à-têtes*, no more fascinating smiles or liquid glances for the puzzled Romney, who found himself suddenly removed to a ceremonious distance—and kept there. She managed this the more readily, since there was a great deal to be done in the way of preparing for the winter campaign, and Madame Vacquant insisted on launching her into the midst of dress-makers and visitors without delay. As for Romney himself, he was enough a man of the world to feel that the barrier thus unexpectedly erected was none the less decided for being quite intangible; and he wasted no useless strength against it. He took the place assigned him, and bided his time—assured that it would come all the sooner for this quiescence. If a man is very much in earnest, such a policy is next thing to impossible to him; yet it is, of all policy, the wisest—and so Julian (who, truth to tell, adopted it sorely against his own will) soon found. Valerie would easily have steeled herself against his efforts, if he had been foolish enough to make any, but the wistful reproach of his eyes was quite another thing, especially when that reproach was seconded by his unexceptionable conduct. So, of her own accord, she began to thaw a little—unbending all the more willingly, since she had really taken quite a fancy to him. Not a fancy that was very deep, or that promised to be of long duration, but which was, nevertheless, tolerably decided, in the half-patronizing way that women of her stamp are fond of affecting toward men of his. Indeed, while the gloss of novelty was on him, he interested her very much. He had no depth, either of talent or culture—she soon discovered that—but the surface was very well polished, and sparkled a little, independently of the polish. He had no stamina or force of character whatever, and was the sort of person who would, as he grew older, either go to the dogs completely, or else settle down into commonplace mediocrity. But while he was young, he had that quickness, that somewhat adaptive cleverness, which goes a great way in society, and often gains for its possessor a reputation for talent, or even positive genius, which is deserved the least in the world. Almost any one, of ordinarily keen perception, looking at his face, could have read a tolerably accurate horoscope of his future—could have said at once that he would never resolve any thing with sufficient earnestness for its fulfilment, and, if he ever achieved any thing, would mar it by his own hasty passion or ill-judged action; but the eyes of youth are not ordinarily of keen perception, and that face was a very beautiful one. If anybody else at all attractive had come across Valerie's path just then, she might, notwithstanding her interest in him, have let his evident *tendresse* die of inanition; but there was literally nobody. Hautaine, poor fellow, had been left behind in Louisiana, and all the new acquaintances which Baltimore society had thrown into her life were absolute nonentities. It is true there was Darcy—but, then, Darcy was her abhorrence. And so, perhaps, the convenient abstraction, which we call Fate, was more to blame than any one else, as days glided into weeks and the general's caution grew more and more dim in his daughter's remembrance. After all, had he not been unreasonable in requesting her to "let alone" the only available material for amusement on hand? She began to think so; and then she also began to think that Romney belonged to

her world, and knew as much about flirtation as she did, and was as little likely to be hurt by it, etc., etc. After that point was reached, it was not difficult to conjecture what became of the promise.

Meanwhile, it is time that a word or two was said concerning one who is, in a certain sense, the hero *par excellence* of the story in progress — i. e., Maurice Darcy. But let no one fear an analysis of his character, or a history of his life. That character must speak for itself in the pages before us, or else it will be hardly worth speaking at all; and that life has little or nothing to do with the position he occupied during the last days of the year 1865. Notwithstanding the uncomfortable perplexities to which it had given rise, this position was a very simple one. Artist as he was by profession, foreigner as he was by birth and rearing, there had been enough of straightforward heroism about this man to bring him to the aid of his mother's country when that country was fighting her desperate fight for independence against those overwhelming odds which the civilized world arrayed against her; and enough of enduring fortitude to keep him in her thinned and starving ranks to the very last. When that last came — when the Confederacy, with one great death-gasp, sank bleeding and helpless —he was lying wounded and sick in a hospital at Richmond. While there, he fell under the kind care of some exiled Marylanders, and it was through them that M. Vacquant learned his condition. Now, it chanced that the remembrance of his sister had been for years the skeleton at the latter's feast of life; and he caught gladly at the opportunity thus offered of reconciliation with her son. His advances were so eagerly, so almost humbly made, that it would have been impossible for any but a churl to reject them; and so, by very natural and simple means, Maurice Darcy became a guest in his uncle's house. That his stay had lengthened so greatly, was partly the fault of M. Vacquant, who closed his ears to the least hint of departure; and partly that of his wound, which had given him a great deal of trouble, and was only just beginning to heal in a satisfactory way when the year during which it had been received, was drawing to a close: but was not in the least owing to any hopes of heirship, or to any desire for a remembrance in that last will and testament which his uncle would one day need to make. Darcy knew very well that his mother's portion of her father's estate had been forfeited when she married against her brother's wishes, but it never occurred to him that even this portion might be his right. He was not a man whose thoughts turned readily to such things —indeed he was a man whom the majority of the world would have counted culpably indifferent to them—and therefore he was slow to appreciate that even he might perhaps fall under the odium of making mercenary calculations. The decision to which M. Vacquant had arrived—the decision of giving to him, instead of to Valerie, the prominent place in his will—was entirely unknown to him; as was also the matrimonial plan which had so moved Miss Aylmer's indignation. In his own opinion, the princely revenues of the Viceroy of Egypt concerned him quite as nearly as his uncle's fortune; and if he yet lingered in Baltimore, instead of pluming his wings for distant flight, it was more because one who has been long storm-tossed is apt to like a peaceful harbor, than for any other reason.

With regard to Miss Aylmer, he thought so little, that there is little to be said. He had been prepared to meet her cordially and frankly, as became a kinsman; and she had seen fit to repulse his advances from the very first. He did not take the trouble to resent her dislike, but still less did he feel inclined to take the trouble to conquer it. Difficulty here did not quicken him to exertion, as it would have done in any other case, because he saw no result that was worth the gaining; and so he let any chance of obtaining her friendly regard go by default. She was not the kind of woman who possessed any attraction for him; and therefore her good or ill opinion was very much a matter of indifference to him —a fact which, after a while, Valerie her self perceived. Whether her disposition to coquetry disgusted him, or whether he fancied her much more foolish and vain than

was really the case, she could not tell; but at least it was impossible to doubt that, from some cause or other, her beauty and fascination fell harmless on him. If he admired her, as an abstract work of art, that was quite as far as he went. Sometimes she doubted even that. Sometimes a glance of those cool, critical eyes filled her with a curious sense of detected guilt, when she met them in the midst of some fascinating by-play. After a while, she grew rather shy of exercising her arts of coquetry when that quick ear was near at hand, and was obliged to take refuge in commonplaces—conscious that she was held at a disadvantage. Of course, none of this made her like Darcy more cordially: on the contrary, she honored him with quite an aversion, and never by any chance spoke to or of him when she could possibly avoid it.

Several weeks elapsed before a very mild autumn came to an end, and Winter announced the beginning of his reign by a fall of snow, which immediately set all the sleigh-bells of the city jingling. Considering her Southern birth and rearing, it was not singular that Valerie should have felt some curiosity to test the enjoyment of this novel amusement, and her face was bright as a sunbeam when she entered the breakfast-room on the morning after the storm.

"Your promise, grandpapa!" she cried, before even the morning greetings were exchanged. "You have not forgotten it, I hope? The first snow, you said—and the first snow is here."

"Of course I have not forgotten it," said M. Vacquant, kissing her, as she bent over him. "A sleigh-ride was it not?—a sleigh-ride you shall certainly have."

"Was that all?"

"Quite all, I think."

"Then I must refresh your memory," returned she. "It was a sleigh-ride, undoubtedly; but it was also the thorough-breds. No, you need not try to look surprised. I remember it perfectly; and so, I am sure, do you."

So, indeed, he did—much better than he liked, as his face—rather blank and crest-fallen—said at once. The matter stood thus: the thorough-breds in question were a pair which Darcy and General Aylmer had bought at the sale they attended together, on the day of the general's departure. M. Vacquant had been enthusiastically pleased with them, and not without good cause. They were nearly perfect in bone and blood, as beautiful as pictures, and wonderful in their qualities of speed; but—they were by no means safe. They had gone to the hammer on account of a serious accident caused by their running away with their last owner; and Darcy had only purchased them because he intended to break them himself. As yet, no one else had tried them, but Valerie looked at them with eyes of desire, and, to silence her importunity, M. Vacquant had promised that, as soon as the first snow fell, she should see what they could do in a sleigh. Perhaps a rash promise was never more heartily regretted than this, when he heard Valerie claim it, and, looking up, met the grave eyes of his nephew.

"*Enfant*," he said, uneasily, "I am not sure about this.—Maurice, what do you think? are the horses sufficiently safe to be trusted?"

"I should certainly say not," Darcy answered. "I have not taken them out for several days, but I should have been very sorry to have had a lady for my companion then."

M. Vacquant turned to his grand-daughter. "You hear that, Valerie!" he said, in the tone of one who considers a matter definitely settled.

But so, evidently, Valerie did not regard it.

"Yes, I hear, grandpapa," she answered, coolly. "But is Captain Darcy always infallible? I am sure it seemed to me that the horses were going beautifully, and as quietly as possible, when I saw them the other day. At all events, I am not afraid—and that is the question."

"Pardon me," Darcy remarked, "but I cannot agree with you in considering that the question. Your lack of fear would not save you from serious consequences, if those horses behaved as they are likely to do."

Valerie turned and looked inquiringly at Romney, who was carelessly sipping his cof-

fee. "Are you afraid?" she asked, with a smile that would have dared even a coward to answer in the affirmative.

But, whatever his other faults, Julian was not a coward, and there was no affectation in his reply.

"You know that I am at your service; but I confess I should not like to be art and part in any accident.—Darcy, do those horses invariably run away?"

"They invariably try to do so."

"Absurd!" broke in Valerie, petulantly. "As if you cannot see that Captain Darcy is giving the poor fellows as bad a character as he possible can! For my part, I always incline to the side of the maligned.—Besides, grandpapa, this is not an open question—you have promised!"

Poor M. Vacquant looked genuinely distressed, and did not answer for several minutes. Then he said, doubtfully:

"I can only consent on one condition, Valerie—that Maurice drives you."

"I cannot think of troubling Captain Darcy," said Valerie, coldly. "And I entirely question your right to make conditions about an unconditional promise. At least I don't mean to imitate your example; for, having promised Mr. Romney that he shall have the perilous honor of driving me, I mean to keep my engagement."

At those words, Romney looked up quickly, with a bright flush of pleasure dyeing his face, while Darcy's countenance did not change in the least, notwithstanding that something of quiet amusement flickered into the deep-gray eyes. When he spoke, however, it was as courteously and kindly as possible.

"I know you would be making a great sacrifice, Miss Aylmer, in exchanging Julian's society for mine; but he must excuse me if, for once, I press you to do so. I do not mean to question either his nerve or ability, but he has never driven these horses, and there is a great deal—almost every thing—in a thorough acquaintance between horse and driver."

"I certainly should not like to take him into danger—" Valerie was beginning, when Julian interrupted her—

"Excuse me, but that is no question at all. If you would feel more safe under Darcy's care, I should not hesitate a moment to waive any claim which your goodness may allow me; but when you come to consider *me*—why, then, I have no option but to remind you of your promise."

Now, the tone of this pleased Valerie. There was more of straightforward manliness, less of boyish petulance, than was usual with the speaker; so, after giving him one bright smile, she turned to Maurice.

"You hear that, Captain Darcy? Of course, after this, I can do nothing save thank you for your offer, and decline it."

Darcy apparently had not expected any thing else. At least he did not look at all disappointed, but only said:

"Then let me hope you will not insist on driving the thorough-breds. Surely Raven and Falcon may once more be allowed the honor of serving you."

"Yes," said M. Vacquant, eagerly. "I am sure you will be reasonable, Valerie."

"I hope I am reasonable, grandpapa," Valerie answered. "But what has reason to do with this? It seems to me that intimidation is the only argument which has been employed. Now, I never was intimidated into a thing in my life; and as for Raven and Falcon, they may suit Captain Darcy, but they are entirely too fat and lazy to suit me! I must have the thorough-breds—or nothing."

It was plain to see that this was an ultimatum. The flushed cheek and compressed lip said so, even more plainly than her words; and, with a sigh, M. Vacquant gave up the point.

"You are acting like a child, and a spoiled one, into the bargain, Valerie," he said; "but I suppose you must have your own way.—Julian, I shall look to you for her safety—remember that!"

Of course, Julian made a suitable and becoming response; but, after that, conversation sensibly languished. M. Vacquant seemed to be seriously disquieted; Madame Vacquant, though she had not interfered by word or glance, looked grave; and even Valerie began to feel vaguely uncomfortable.

After breakfast this feeling decidedly in-

creased. It was not, in the least, one of fear—of that sensation she was physically incapable—but rather one of shame, as if she had extorted some concession to which she had no right, besides acting very foolishly. If her grandfather only had been concerned in the matter, she would certainly have gone to him and offered a compromise; but then—as she steeled herself by thinking—it was not to him that she would be yielding, but to Maurice Darcy. She thought of his cool, decided advice, and—no—she could not give him this triumph. Any thing else would be preferable! She was on her way down to the library—half-ready to make a sacrifice of her inclination—when this consideration brought her to a sudden pause. It chanced to be just under a richly-stained window, which threw its gules of gorgeous color down from above, making her look like some transfigured picture after the old Italian school, when Maurice Darcy came suddenly upon her. For a moment, he caught his breath—few artists would not have done so, at sight of such rare loveliness—and then he advanced directly.

"I am glad to meet you, Miss Aylmer," he said, in his frank way. "I was just coming in search of you. It has occurred to me, since breakfast, that perhaps I did not speak strongly enough to deter you from your intended drive, or to induce you to accept my escort. I sometimes err on the side of *brusquerie*, and I may have done so in this instance. But I beg you to believe the sincerity of my warning and my offer."

"I never doubted either," Valerie said—touched despite herself by his tone and manner—"and you do yourself injustice when you talk of *brusquerie*. I saw nothing whatever that savored of it. But, in repeating your offer, you forget that I am engaged to Mr. Romney."

"Julian, I am sure, would not hesitate to release you; and I feel less compunction in urging the sacrifice, than I should if my motive was a selfish one."

Perhaps this too candid statement jarred on the ear which had been so long accustomed to flattery's softest accents; at least, Valerie bit her lip as she answered, rather coolly:

"Thank you. But my drive would not give me much pleasure, if I knew that I was victimizing you all the time. Now, Mr. Romney will not regard it so purely in the light of an unpleasant matter of duty. Therefore, I prefer to run a shade more risk with him."

"I am afraid you have misunderstood me again," Darcy said; "or else I am very unfortunate about expressing myself. I am sure nothing could be less of 'unpleasant duty' than such a service; and, if I did not speak of myself in the matter, it was only because I did not fancy that my enjoyment would interest you."

"Probably, also, you could not do so conscientiously."

There was much of sarcasm in the tone which made this amendment; but Darcy ignored it entirely—answering simply and honestly:

"You are mistaken. I have not been able to contribute any thing to your enjoyment hitherto, but nothing would give me more pleasure than to do so now."

The accent of kindly sincerity in his tone conquered, for the moment, Valerie's petulant wilfulness. She felt ashamed of herself; and action was quick upon feeling, with this impulsive nature. The dark eyes looked up with the contrition of a penitent child in their depths, and the voice, that was never without the music of the sweet South, sounded unusually soft and low when she answered:

"Pray pardon me. It is I who have been brusque, and, I fear, ungrateful. You are very kind to be concerned about my safety, and I shall be glad—"

A foot fall, and a soft rustle of silk, made her break off abruptly. The next moment, Madame Vacquant came down the staircase, on the landing of which they stood. Seeing them, she paused.

"So Maurice is trying the effect of persuasion, since intimidation failed," she said, with a smile, "and apparently with more effect. At least I thought I heard something about 'shall be glad'—and, for poor Julian's sake, I hope it does not mean leaving him in the lurch?"

"I have been trying to persuade Miss

Aylmer that, for Julian's sake, as well as her own, it would be well to inflict the desolation upon him," Darcy answered, before Valerie could reply. "You will agree with me, I am sure."

The lady smiled—that cold, calm smile which never, by any chance, warmed into genial expression—and shook her head.

"Perhaps I ought to agree with you," she said; "but then, mothers are very foolish, and I can't help thinking of poor Julian's disappointment. He will feel it so much!"

"I—I was thinking more of him than of myself," said Valerie, quickly.

"Then I have his reputation for courage sufficiently at heart, to beg you not to think of him any more," answered Madame Vacquant. "He would never forgive me if I did not assure you that nothing is needed less than consideration of his safety. Besides, I can testify, from personal knowledge, that he is really an excellent whip."

"But these horses"—Darcy began.

"Excuse me," Valerie interrupted, "but please don't abuse them any more, for my mind is made up. If I am not to consider Mr. Romney, I am sure I don't consider myself; so the use of the thorough-breds is a settled fact. I am much obliged to you for your kind offer to drive me; but a promise given should be a promise kept, you know."

She bent her head very gracefully at the last words, and, before Darcy could reply, was half-way up the stairs, vanishing in a flood of purple and golden light. He looked after her for a moment, then turned to Madame Vacquant with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"A wilful woman always does have her own way, I believe," he said. "But I confess I am sorry Miss Aylmer is so obstinate. For Julian's sake, as well as for her own, it is a pity, madame, that you had not thrown your influence in the other scale."

The face before him paled a little.

"Do you—do you really think there is any danger?" she asked.

"I think it is a great risk, to say the least. If you could even yet persuade Miss Aylmer—"

"There's not the faintest hope of that," she interrupted. "You see, for yourself, how spoiled and wilful she is. She is certainly going; and I do not think that, even if I had not spoken, she would have accepted your offer."

"She is good enough to honor me with quite a dislike, I know," he answered. "I might be sorry, if I was conscious of ever having done any thing to deserve it; but, as it is, I really have not troubled myself on the subject—feeling sure that I fail in some point which it is out of my power to mend."

They were descending the stairs together, and, at these words, Madame Vacquant looked at him with a slight laugh.

"You are wonderfully honest and simple, my dear Maurice," she said. "Is it possible you are really so blind as not to know why Valerie dislikes you?"

"How should I know?" he asked, carelessly. "I take it for granted that she does not fancy my *brusquerie* and plainness; but, beyond that, I have not even hazarded a conjecture."

"I don't suppose she fancies your standard of gallantry," the lady answered; "but I doubt if she would go to the length of positively disliking it. The truth is—and any one but yourself would long since have seen it—she thinks you may come in for a large share of her fortune."

Darcy's eyes opened in the most genuine astonishment.

"For a large share? Why, what have I to do with her fortune?" he asked.

"Pshaw!" said his companion, a little impatiently. "I am afraid I must vote you dull as well as honest. Look at the matter yourself, and you will see what you have to do with her fortune; or, rather, with her future prospect of fortune. She is her grandfather's direct heiress; but you are his nephew, and she evidently fears that your influence over him may result in your sharing her inheritance."

The words were scarcely uttered before the speaker saw that she had not overrated their probable effect. A dark-red flush surged hotly over Darcy's brow, and a quick gleam of haughty indignation flashed into his eyes. Taken by surprise as he was, the

insult of such a suspicion made itself felt at once, and the whole nature of the man rose in arms to resent it.

"What does Miss Aylmer consider me?" he said. "What kind of a dastard does she think it would be who could scheme to rob a woman of her inheritance, without a shadow of claim! She would have paid me a higher compliment if she had suspected me of open theft!"

"Don't be foolish, or I shall be sorry for having told you," said the lady, eagerly. "You know the world, and the ways of it. Every man takes what he can get, by cunning or by force; and we judge men, not according to the exception, but according to the rule. Valerie, no doubt, thinks it very natural that you should desire to supplant her in her grandfather's will."

"Thinks it natural that *I* should desire it!" said Darcy, who plainly could not see the force of such an explanation. "Pardon me, madame, but, if she thinks so, it only proves one thing—that nobody ever yet was ready to suspect another of what she was incapable of herself!"

They had reached the library-door by this time, and, opening it for her, he saw her in, then bowed, and went his way.

At luncheon, every one avoided, with great care, the debatable ground, and it was not until they rose from table that Romney said to Miss Aylmer:

"Will three o'clock suit you as the hour for starting?—the afternoons are so short now, that we ought not to be later than that."

"It will suit me quite well," she answered, hesitating a moment, as if about to add something else, but, catching Darcy's eye, she colored and remained silent. After that, nothing further was said, excepting by Madame Vacquant, who looked up as Valerie was leaving the room, and advised warm wrappings. "For I really think we shall have another fall of snow," she said, rising and walking to one of the windows.

Julian followed her, and, while they looked out on the dreary scene, which was made up of snow-covered roof and a leaden sky, the mother spoke fast and eagerly:

"For God's sake, take care of yourself!" she said, passionately. "My heart begins to misgive me terribly. I scarcely think the end is worth the risk—at least not such a risk as this! If *her* neck was broken, it would not be much more than she deserves; but for *you*—O Julian, Julian, promise me that you will not be rash!"

Julian frowned impatiently. No eyes save his had ever seen that pleading look on his mother's face; but he seemed strangely unmoved by it.

"Of course I will not be rash," he said. "I have Miss Aylmer's safety, as well as my own, to think of, you know. I hope you won't be so absurd as to make yourself uneasy, mother—I have told you that there is really no danger in driving the horses. All this talk about their vicious habits is pure braggadocio on Darcy's part, to reflect glory on himself."

"Yes," she answered. "I know you told me so, or else I should not have interfered as I did this morning, when Valerie was on the point of accepting his escort. I have been sorry for it ever since; I am still more sorry now that the time draws near."

"Sorry for it!"—the handsome face was all set and lowering—"you are certainly kind to say that, when you know how much depends on this. I thought you would walk on to your end, over any thing, mother!"

"Over any thing but your safety," the mother answered, shivering slightly. Then she drew back, and said no more.

An hour or two later, Pierre, the most dignified and urbane of *ancien-régime* negroes, knocked at the door of Darcy's room, and announced the arrival of the sleigh.

"Well," said the latter, who was deep in a sketch, "what have I to do with it? Mr. Romney is the person whom you should inform of the fact."

"Mr. Romney has gone down, sir," Pierre answered; "but I thought—maybe you meant to see him off, and so I made bold to tell you."

Darcy looked up, and read—as a duller man might have done—a painful anxiety in the honest, bronze face before him. He remembered how long the old servant had

known and loved Valerie; and it was characteristic of the man that he answered as frankly and kindly as if he had been speaking to the best gentleman in the land.

"I see what you mean, Pierre, but what can I do? Literally nothing. Miss Aylmer is determined to be driven by Mr. Romney, and all that we can hope is, that the thorough-breds will for once behave themselves."

"You couldn't hope that, if you looked at them, sir," Pierre replied. "I've seed vicious horses in my life, but I never seed any thing that looked like these. It's as much as two boys can do to hold 'em now."

Darcy's face settled gravely; but he only shook his head and repeated again:

"I can do nothing."

"You can come down and see 'em off, and maybe give them a warning, sir," Pierre pleaded. "I've seen Mr. Julian drive, and Lord love you, sir, Miss Valerie herself can manage the reins as well as him!"

"It would be strange if he *did* know much about it," Darcy muttered. The next moment he was on his way down-stairs.

He found only Julian and his mother in the hall, for Valerie had not yet made her appearance. Neither was M. Vacquant visible; so, merely saying—

"I have come to see you off, Romney," he passed on to the outer door.

The sleigh—a very light and elegant little cutter—looked graceful and inviting enough to have tempted almost any gaze to linger on it; but Darcy's eye did not do so, even for a moment. His glance settled on the horses, and he recognized at once the justice of Pierre's judgment. They were indeed so restive that it required all the strength of two grooms to keep them still, and, if there was any truth in the warning of eye or movement, they meant mischief, as surely as those firm hands were once taken from their bits.

"They're awful bad to-day, sir," one of the men said, touching his cap, as he caught Darcy's eye. "But p'raps a hand like your'n may do 'em some good. I have never seen 'em so fractious before, though."

"I am not going to drive them," Maurice answered, shortly; and, as he spoke, a light, silvery voice in his rear cried gayly, "Oh, what beautiful creatures!" And the next moment he drew aside to let Miss Aylmer pass. She was looking radiantly lovely in her close-fitting velvet jacket and becoming ermine furs. So, when she paused, he felt his face relaxing in spite of himself.

"Won't you at least give me a *bon voyage*, Captain Darcy?" she said, with a bright smile. "I am sorry to seem so dreadfully obstinate, but I am sure nobody could ever plead a greater temptation than that," and she pointed to the horses, whose spirited heads, and curving necks made a very attractive picture just then.

"*Bon voyage*, with all my heart," Darcy answered, "and I trust sincerely that I may prove the most unreliable prophet in the world. May I put you in the sleigh?"

She looked back, and, seeing that her grandfather was holding fast the impatient Julian, nodded assent, and extended her hand. The next moment she was ensconced in the deep, luxurious seat, and Darcy was drawing the buffalo-robes well round her, when Julian came up and sprang in. While he gathered up the reins, the other found time for one last caution.

"Be sure and keep a firm, steady rein on them, Romney; never relax it for one moment, although there *are* some things pleasanter on the arms. I would not advise you to begin any very interesting conversation, either; for they need constant watching. If they once take the bits between their teeth, turn the sleigh over in the first drift you come to—any thing will be better than leaving yourselves at their mercy, and you are not likely to stop them. I hope all will go well, however.—Now, let go their heads, boys."

The grooms fell back on each side, and the same instant, with a bound that nearly dragged Julian from his seat, the thorough-breds were off.

As they whirled out of sight, around the sharp corner of the street, all that could be seen was the hand which Valerie waved over the back of the sleigh in triumphant enjoyment.

Darcy watched them with suspended breath, as long as they were visible. When they vanished, he turned round, and perceived his uncle standing on the steps, with a very disturbed face.

"Maurice," he said, anxiously, "I wish I had not allowed this!—I wish I had interfered even a moment ago. Surely *you* see that that boy will never be able to control those horses?"

"You could easily have prevented his attempting it, sir," Darcy answered, dryly; for in truth he felt very little sympathy with the weakness which M. Vacquant had so conspicuously displayed.

"I know!—I know!—" the other said, impatiently. "I was very foolish to allow it; but it won't save Valerie, that I recognize the fact now.—Maurice, for God's sake, follow them, and try to do something!"

Maurice shrugged his shoulders. It certainly seemed rather singular that, after disregarding all his advice, M. Vacquant should now implore his aid; but perhaps the request tallied with his own desire—at all events, he only answered, by turning to one of the grooms, and saying:

"Bring Bayard out at once. Don't waste time about it, for I will be down again in a minute."

In little more than that time, he was mounted, and galloping after the sleigh.

CHAPTER V.

DERRING-DO.

MEANWHILE, the thorough-breds were behaving so well that, as they whirled into the park-gates without having met with any misadventure, Julian could not forbear a sneer on the absent horseman, who was just then cantering down Garden Street toward them.

"You see now how much reason there was for Darcy's fears; and how much probable truth in his representations of danger. The horses are certainly spirited, but as for the rest—it was nonsense, to say the least of it! We can make allowances however, for the weaknesses of athletic nature. There really is no creature alive so vain of muscular repute as your would-be 'plunger.'"

He spoke with more bitterness than Valerie fancied; but, as she herself was very much reassured by the good behavior of the horses—she could not see the vicious devil in their eyes, which only waited a suitable opportunity, or plausible pretext, for exhibition—she, too, began to entertain very much the same opinion of Darcy's warning. So, she did not utter any rebuke, but only said, with a laugh:

"He probably wanted to keep the enjoyment and the glory all to himself. I can scarcely blame him—they do go so delightfully!—but still he need not have made me feel as uncomfortable as I have felt all day."

They were skimming down one of the snow-covered roads which branched to the right from the main entrance, when she said this, and Julian repeated her words at once.

"Uncomfortable all day! I am very sorry to hear that, and—surprised too. I did not think you would have let him influence you, and"—a sensible lowering of the voice—"I thought you might perhaps have felt some reliance on me."

"I don't know that he influenced me—that is, made me afraid," she answered, nonchalantly; "at least if only myself had been concerned, I am sure I should not have hesitated a moment; but I felt rather ashamed of insisting on a mere caprice, and I began to be a little apprehensive lest I might be taking you into danger."

Words could not have been uttered in a more matter-of-fact tone than these last, yet they brought a warm light into Romney's face, and a yet warmer tone into his voice.

"You were very good to think of me," he said. "To be so considered, I fear I should hesitate very little over real danger. I am almost sorry that there is none in this—that I might prove to you how much I would do to gratify even a 'caprice' of yours."

"I am sure you are doing a great deal," she said, cordially. "Captain Darcy would

take you to task very severely for speaking so disrespectfully of our present enterprise; and, whether or not there is danger in it, there is at least risk enough to make me grateful for your willingness to give me pleasure."

"I would empty my veins to do that!" he answered, with a touch of the boy's high-flown exaggeration, yet enough of the man's earnestness to fire *la belle des belles* with the spirit of her favorite sport.

"Pshaw!" she said, with the saucy smile of half-challenge, half-defiance, which had turned more heads than a few. "It is so easy to make professions—especially when there is not the least danger of being taken seriously. You had better rest contented on your laurels; for there's always risk in giving a *carte blanche* of that sort to feminine vanity. I might be tempted to make a heavy draft on your daring."

"Draw to any amount, and see if it be not promptly honored," he replied, readily, for his had been a very fair flirtation training before this.

Miss Aylmer shook her head.

"I beg you won't tempt me, for I am so strongly warned by the past. More times than I would like to count, I have been on the eve of bestowing my favor on some valiant knight who called all the gods to witness that he was wholly *sans peur*, but when the test came—well, then I found exactly what I said a moment ago, that professions are easy to make, and hard to fulfil. Therefore, I have grown rather incredulous, and— Oh!"

The exclamation was uttered very suddenly, for a deer bounded across their path, and the horses gave a simultaneous bolt, a rush, and then indulged in a rearing which tested all the strength of Romney's wrists. Valerie sat quite still, making neither sign nor sound while the short battle lasted; but after a moment the thorough-breds proved that they had not meant serious business. They settled down to their stride again, and then Julian looked round at his companion with a flash of not unnatural triumph in his eyes.

"You see how easily they are managed," he said.

"I see how wise I was in placing myself under your protection," answered Valerie, who knew better than any woman living when and how to compliment. "I doubt whether Captain Darcy could have brought them to terms any sooner, or probably half as soon. I can well believe that any draft on your daring would be promptly honored."

"Then—in view of the promised reward—may I hope that you will speedily make one?"

She looked up with a smile.

"Don't be foolish, please. Who talked of reward?"

"You did—when you spoke of the favor that has never yet been won."

"Ah, but perhaps you think this favor something greater than it really is. Would you do much for this?"

She touched, as she spoke, a knot of ribbon that fluttered at her throat; and, watching the hand which made the gesture, Romney answered quickly:

"I would do any thing!"

"Then perhaps, some day, I will set you a deed of derring-do," she said, gayly. "These are my colors, that I have never yet given any one the right— A—h!"

This was rather a prolonged gasp than an exclamation, and there was good cause for it. Lulled into carelessness by the ease with which he had mastered the horses a few moments before, Romney had forgotten Darcy's caution against entering into any very interesting conversation; and, listening eagerly to Valerie, he had paid little attention to them. Nothing, perhaps, is so quick of perception as a horse; and, when the restive thorough-breds felt those slackened reins upon their backs, there was but one thought between them—"Now is our time." A jingling sleigh that glided past, laden with a merry crew of school-girls, gave a color of excuse to the frantic bound which threw Valerie violently back, and nearly jerked the reins out of Romney's hands. The next moment the bits were between their teeth, their heads were down, and they were off.

Now, although none of it is very pleasant, there are great differences in the differ

ent modes of running away. There is the foolish horse, who, having a chronic distrust of white logs, cows, sheep, and children, loses his head entirely at sight of any of these objects, and runs from pure and simple fear There is the gamesome horse, who is fond of his own joke, and runs away whenever he sees a good chance of frightening anybody, or doing a limited amount of damage. There is the passionate horse, who gets angry occasionally, and asserts his dignity by committing a good deal of mischief, but who is easily amenable to reason. And, lastly, there is the vicious horse, in whom no wise man will ever put trust, who is ruled only by the strong hand, and whose outbreaks invariably mean serious harm to every one concerned.

The merest child, looking at them now, could not have doubted to which of these classes the thorough-breds belonged. That wild rush had little of genuine fright in it; but the glaring eyes and distended nostrils —more than all, that fatally significant clamp of the iron jaws—promised little hope of checking them. Perhaps Julian realized this as fully as need be; but he clung to the reins with desperate energy, nevertheless. Bracing his feet against the front of the sleigh, he twined the lines many times round his hands, and brought all his strength to bear. It was not very much; but, if it had been that of Hercules, it would have availed all the same; for the stanchest muscles alive might as well have pulled against stone. Of control over their movements he had not so much as a pretence. He felt this with horrible force, as Darcy's last words recurred to him; and he saw that he could not even guide them sufficiently to follow his advice and capsize the sleigh. There was prospect, indeed, that the speed which sent it dashing from side to side of the road, would eventually do this; but there was little consolation in such a hope, since the fall of snow had been so light that drifts were few and the ground not more than barely covered. They were whirling down a steep declivity, with a narrow bridge before them, when he turned and looked at Valerie. She had not uttered a sound, or made a movement since her first exclamation some time before; but although her face was as pale as possible, the dark eyes met his calmly and steadily. There must have been something reassuring in their gaze, for the next instant they flashed over the bridge—how neither of them ever knew —and then Julian said, quite coolly:

"This must end soon. They will either throw us out, or—"

The words were cut short suddenly, as the sleigh was hurled headlong against a post that marked the boundary of the road, the tense reins broke with a loud snap, as of a whip, and Julian was shot headforemost out a distance of at least twenty yards. It all passed with the rapidity of a flash of lightning. Valerie had barely time for one gurgling cry—barely time for one glimpse of the figure that lay motionless where it had fallen at the foot of a tree—when she was whirled out of sight and away.

After this she had very little idea of any thing that occurred, or very little fear for any result. She knew that the horses were shaping their course down the main avenue, and, unless they were stopped at the gate, would soon be in the open highway; but this, which meant certain destruction to herself, scarcely dwelt on her mind an instant —she was too absorbed in wondering whether Julian was killed; too much absorbed in picturing over and over that last awful sight of him. Strange as it may seem, she did not even pray. "My fault! my fault!" were the only words that rang through her brain, while the familiar forms of supplication seemed to have faded far away from her recollection. Mechanically she unclasped a small rosary from her wrist, but even the names "Jesus" and "Mary" came faintly and slowly, as from palsied lips. It was only when she saw before her the open gates and the massive blocks of granite that were scattered before it—only when she realized that there, in all probability, would be the end at once of life and beauty —did she find voice for one cry which we must all sooner or later make, "God have mercy on me!" Then she closed her eyes, and waited for the end.

Now it chanced that the thorough-breds having made better time than even he had

counted on, Darcy had only just paused at the arched entrance to question a loitering policeman whether the object of his search had entered before him, when the runaway horses came thundering into sight, dragging behind them the sleigh, which bounded to and fro like a living thing in agony.

"By G—d, there's the very team you're asking after, now!" cried the man, excitedly, recognizing at once the handsome chestnuts he had admired so much as they swept past him with their long, swinging trot, half an hour before. "Stand out of the way, sir—it's more'n a man's life's worth to try to stop 'em now!"

But Darcy did not heed the admonition. He only stood up in his stirrups and looked forward with a quick, eager gaze—a gaze the meaning of which the policeman at once understood, for he looked too, and then said, rapidly:

"You're right, sir—the sleigh's empty. That's something to be thankful for—there was as pretty—"

"I can't tell," muttered Darcy between his teeth. "If I could only see—"

"Stand back, for your life!" shouted the other, his anxiety getting the better of his fear, so far that he even rushed at Bayard's bridle and drew him out of the path of the horses now charging down upon them. But to his utter amazement, as he did so, Darcy was out of the saddle—the next moment he rushed full at the thoroughbreds and grasped their bits.

Of course he did not stop them—no mortal hands could have done that—but he swung to them desperately, and the policeman saw him dragged past at the same moment that he recognized a woman's presence in the sleigh. That honest guardian of the peace never had any very clear remembrance of what ensued. He only recollected swearing a great oath in sheer astonishment, and letting Bayard go about his own devices, while he ran full tilt after the sleigh, with no ulterior intentions whatever. The next moment, he saw something which brought him to a horrified pause. Although he had been dragged several yards, bleeding and half-stunned, Darcy had never once relaxed his hold upon the bits—if he had done so, it would have been all over with him, as well as with Valerie, and after a while he struggled to his feet. Then, breast to breast, began one of the most awful sights in this world—the sight of man against brute! The horses were quite beside themselves, by this time, and seemed possessed of a strength tenfold their own as they reared and plunged against the iron muscles that held their heads. The sleigh swayed to and fro, like a wicker-basket, with their frantic struggles, while the wild, glancing eyes and foaming mouths made a strange contrast to the man's face, which was set in the rigidity of marble. The contest was so unequal, that it could only have ended in one way, and that very speedily, if the policeman had not gathered his senses sufficiently to run forward when he saw the progress of the horses once fairly arrested. With his help, they were at length brought to a panting and exhausted stand. Then Darcy staggered back, and sat down on a block of stone, pale and gasping.

"I'm afraid the brutes have hurt you badly, sir," the former said, respectfully. He could scarcely bring himself to pity the man whose pluck had fought such a good fight.

But Darcy only shook his head; and, rising after a moment, walked to the side of the sleigh, where he found Valerie, as he had half-expected, too weak from the mere physical reaction to think of moving. She looked so white, that he thought at first she might be about to faint, but the tone of her voice reassured him—it was perfectly firm and steady, although strangely tense and unnatural.

"I am glad you were not killed, too," she said. "But we must not wait here a moment. We must go back to—him!"

"Do you mean Julian?" Darcy asked, startled into a sudden fear by her tone and manner. "Where is he?"

He was scarcely surprised, and a little reassured, at hearing all that she knew. After hearing it, he did not waste any time in comment. He only lifted her from the sleigh—disencumbering her of the many wrappings which had probably saved her life by keeping her fast—and asked if she

could show him the place where Romney had been left. She assented, eagerly, and, after sending a mounted messenger to town for a carriage, he was about to set forward, when a sleigh, that had been jingling up the avenue for some minutes, paused beside them, and a gentleman sprang hurriedly out.

"Darcy!" he said, quickly, "this is better luck than I expected. See here!—we've picked up Romney, and I fear he is badly hurt."

"Only hurt!" repeated Darcy, hearing Valerie's sudden gasp at his side. "Only hurt, then?"

"Only hurt, certainly—not killed, if you mean that. But I don't like the look of him. He is either stunned, or he has fainted very dead away."

Darcy put Valerie down on a block of stone. "You had better stay here," he said; and, without giving her any time for expostulation, he strode away at once to the sleigh.

"He must have received a severe blow on the head," he said, after looking at Romney's pale, insensible face, and feeling his pulse. "I am afraid it may prove to be concussion of the brain; but, of course, I can't tell. We must get him home, and into a doctor's hands, as soon as possible. Do you think any bones are broken?"

"I fancy one arm is—at least he moaned when we touched it, and it hangs like a fractured limb."

"Which arm?"

"The right."

Darcy leaned over and touched it gently, but with all his care he brought forth a low moan of pain, and the eyes opened for a moment, but closed again immediately.

"I don't think there's a doubt of its being broken," he said. "How did you chance to find him?"

"He was lying immediately on the side of the road," the other answered. "Arle saw him at once."

"Arle was with you?"

"Yes—to his cost. You know how he hates walking, and he is footing it homeward now. I suppose he will reach the gate here about dark. Now, what is to be done with this poor fellow? Shall I take him home, or will you?"

"I would ask you to take him on at once, if it were not for his mother," said Darcy. "Somebody ought to prepare her, and it is impossible for me to leave Miss Aylmer here alone."

"Pray don't think of me!" said Valerie, who had come forward unperceived by either of them. "I will stay here—anywhere—sooner than keep you a moment. Captain Darcy, pray go!"

"Unfortunately I forgot, when I spoke of doing so, that my horse has been sent away," Darcy answered. "Thornton, I suppose there's nothing for it, but to let you take him on. They will be partly at least prepared, by my sending for the carriage. At all events, we have no right to risk delay."

Thornton—a pale, slender, keen-faced man—evidently thought the same thing. So he sprang into the sleigh, laid Julian's head as comfortably back as he could, and, in a moment more, whirled out of sight.

Then Darcy, turning round, discovered two facts: the first, that snow had been falling for some time; the second, that Miss Aylmer looked almost as pale as the boy who had just been sent away. Now, there never was a man who had less sympathy with any form of caprice or coquetry than this brave, simple "straight-goer," and of both he held Valerie so guilty that only a moment before his heart had been wholly steeled against pity for any suffering of hers; but now it melted suddenly at sight of her wan face and sad eyes, and he said, kindly and cordially:

"I fear I have forgotten how cold and tired you must be. Let me take you to the sleigh, and wrap you up. That will be some protection until the carriage comes."

She held out her hand without a word—he could not help remembering how differently, an hour or two before, she had extended it for the same purpose—and let him take her and cover her up under the afghans and buffalo-robes. Then she leaned back, still quite silently, while he went up to the policeman, who held the thorough breds -now safely out of harness—and re-

turned his thanks both verbally and substantially. After a while he came back, and asked Valerie if she felt very cold.

"Not cold at all—you have covered me so well," she answered. "I am truly ashamed not to have asked you before, but I hope you are not much hurt?"

"I! Oh, no," he said, with a smile. "I am cast-steel—warranted not to break or injure under any provocation."

"I hope you will never need to do such a thing again," she said, with a shudder. "It was horrible!—I seem to see it yet! And—and I have not thanked you."

"I trust you will not think of doing so," he replied, quickly. "Pray don't fancy yourself under obligations, or any thing of that kind. I hope I should have done the same for anybody."

"I don't doubt that," she answered; "but it should not lessen my gratitude that I chanced to be the person whom you saved."

Involuntarily, as it seemed, Darcy frowned a little.

"Will you pardon me if I repeat that such a word does not apply to me in the least? I could not have 'saved' you if our friend yonder had not been at hand; or if the horses had not been nearly spent."

At another time, Valerie would doubtless have felt and resented this repulse; but now she looked up almost appealingly.

"At least, then, you will let me ask you to forgive the folly and wilfulness which caused all this?"

It was an unfortunate question—for, gentleman as he was to the core, and mailed in all gentlemanly courtesy, Darcy could sometimes speak an abrupt home-truth very sharply. Now he answered almost without thought:

"It is scarcely my forgiveness that you should ask, Miss Aylmer. I have not suffered for the gratification of your whim, as that poor boy whom we sent home has done, and will yet do."

The next moment he felt sorry for having so spoken—sorry when he saw the pale cheek flush, and the delicate shoulder shrink as from a blow.

"I know—" she said, with something of a gasp. "But I think *he* will forgive me."

"I do not doubt it," Darcy dryly answered. "I believe there is the carriage at last. Will you allow me?"

He assisted her once more out of the sleigh, and put her into the carriage, which had drawn up beside them. Then he closed the door, and raised his hat.

"Are you not coming?" she asked in surprise.

He shook his head.

"No. I shall drive these horses in.—Did you bring the reins I sent for, John? Yes—that is all right. Miss Aylmer, I would recommend a glass of wine as soon you reach home.—Drive on, Green."

CHAPTER VI.

THOSE WHO DANCE MUST PAY THE PIPER.

When Miss Aylmer reached home, her grandfather came hurrying down into the lower hall to meet her; and from him she learned that the surgeon was then setting Julian's arm.

"Oh, grandpapa, how can I ever forgive myself!" she cried, with all the terror, the anxiety, the vexation of the last hour culminating at length in a burst of weeping, which quite startled M. Vacquant by its violence. "I have half-killed that poor boy, and I came very near quite killing your—your nephew, while I, the cause of it all, am not hurt in the least. Oh, I am a wretch!—I don't know what you must think of me!"

"I think you will know better next time, and be guided by the advice of older people," answered her grandfather, soothingly. Like all men, he had a nervous horror of tears, and he would have said any thing to stop the lachrymal flow that was pouring over the shoulder of his coat as he held his granddaughter in his arms. "Don't be foolish, *petite;* and don't cry that way—it is dreadful! Julian is not much hurt, and you are safe—let us thank God for that."

"I wish I had been hurt!" cried Valerie. "I deserve any thing! I was the person in fault, and I—I am the only one all safe."

"What! Is Maurice hurt also?" asked M. Vacquant, quickly. "Nobody told me that."

"Hurt! He says he is not, but I know he *must* be. O grandpapa, it was awful! If you could have seen the fight he had, to stop those horses! I expected every moment that they would dash him under their feet and trample him to death. They must have hurt him!—I know they must—and all for me!"

At which consideration, Miss Aylmer sat down on one of the library-chairs—her grandfather had drawn her into this room—and sobbed more like a child than like the bright, haughty *La belle des belles.*

"He is a brave fellow—Maurice!" said M. Vacquant. "I knew he could be relied on—and, *mon Dieu!* how glad I am that I sent him! I hope you won't forget, *enfant*, that you owe your life to him."

"Forget it?—no! And that is just the hardest part of it all!" cried *enfant*, with a burst of tears that were now solely born of vexation. "I could bear all the rest, but that is intolerable! To think how I have treated him, and how I despised him, and how I went against all his advice, and how I snubbed him, and—and that *he* should have been the one to stop the horses! If it had been anybody else in the wide world, I could have borne it better; but this is too hard!"

"Valerie!" said M. Vacquant. He was quite aghast, and he could say nothing more.

"O grandpapa, you don't know how hard it is! You never had to endure such a humiliation! I don't believe any body ever had to endure the like before! Under obligation for my very life to—to a person like that!"

"Valerie, this is very improper—very ungrateful language," said her grandfather, severely. "You force me to remind you that you are speaking of my nephew as well as your cousin; and of a man who has just saved your life at the risk of his own."

"I don't need to be reminded," cried Valerie, in a tone of exasperation. "That is exactly what is the matter! I wish he had let my neck be broken—I do! This is the second time he has laid me under obligation, and I—I hate him!"

"That will do, I think," said M. Vacquant, with quite an imposing wave of the hand. For once he was so thoroughly out of patience with his petted, spoiled grandchild, that he could not forbear expressing it. "That is quite sufficient, Valerie. When you are cooler, you will see the impropriety and ingratitude of this conduct. At present you had better go and change your dress."

Valerie rose at once from her seat, but, instead of going to change her dress, she went and twined her arms round her grandfather's neck.

"I am sorry," she said. "I know it sounded very badly. I won't talk so any more—I will indeed try not to feel so any more. But don't let him come between you and me, grandpapa—especially after I have been so nearly taken from you."

"Yes," said M. Vacquant, in a hushed voice; and he kissed tenderly the beautiful face of which he was so proud. "Yes, you were nearly taken from me, and you are given back to me again—thanks to *le bon Dieu*, and, after Him, thanks to Maurice."

Valerie set her lips hard, but, true to her promise, she said nothing. She only thought that it was part—the hardest part—of her punishment, to hear this, and to know that it was true. After God, she certainly owed her safety of life and limb to Maurice Darcy; and there is not a doubt but that, as she said, she would rather have owed it to anybody else in the wide world. It was not enough that she had resisted his entreaties, and set his advice at naught, in this particular matter; but she had so disliked him, from the first, so gloried in provoking his tacit disapproval by her manifestations of caprice and coquetry, and now this very caprice and coquetry had called down upon her the weightiest obligation to him that one human being can incur from another. It was a retribution—she felt that—but she also felt that it was almost more than she could bear.

"Grandpapa, tell me about Julian," she said, after a minute. "Is he much hurt?"

"The doctors think not," answered her grandfather. "He is still, I believe, lying in a half-stunned condition; but they say —at least Dr. Preston does—that he will get over that in a few hours without any ill effect, and that his arm is the only serious injury."

"Serious! Do you mean dangerous?"

"Oh, no. Who ever heard of danger from a broken bone? The only injury that will trouble him after a day or two, they mean."

"Thank God!" said Valerie, fervently. "Not but that a broken arm is bad enough," she added, hastily; "but one feels as if it was little, because it is so much less than might have been. Poor Julian! poor boy! O grandpapa, I never expect to forgive myself for causing him all this!"

M. Vacquant smiled a little—Julian's injuries did not seem to weigh much on his mind—and smoothed her hair indulgently. "Don't worry about Julian," he said. "He will soon be well. Only take care," he added, gravely, "that you never inflict a deeper injury on him than any you have caused to-day."

Valerie's face flushed. Her conscience told her at once what he meant—and, for once, she did not reject or fence off the unpalatable advice. "Never, if I can help it, grandpapa," she said, earnestly. Then she kissed him again, and, gathering up her hat and cloak, which she had cast aside on her entrance, went up-stairs.

Just as she reached the head of the staircase, she came upon Madame Vacquant and Dr. Preston, who were standing outside the door of Julian's chamber, talking together.

"I think all will go right now," the doctor was saying, "if you will keep things perfectly quiet, and don't allow— Ah, Miss Aylmer, how are you? I am glad to see that you at least were not hurt by your accident."

"I can scarcely be glad myself, doctor, when I think that others suffered instead of me," answered Valerie, yielding her hand to the physician's cordial grasp, but looking past him to Madame Vacquant, whose face had hardened at her approach. "How is—Julian?"

She hesitated a moment before uttering the name, and then gave it with a softness which, if Julian could have heard, he would certainly have thought quite irresistible. But his mother's face did not relax in the least; and it was the doctor who answered.

"Oh, Julian is doing as well as we could hope or desire; and, like a gallant knight, I am sure he does not regret the wound he incurred in so fair a service"—he thought it necessary to point this compliment by a little bow. "The fracture was a simple one, and has been well set. As for the insensibility caused by concussion of the brain, that will soon pass off—has, in fact, almost entirely passed off now."

"May—may I see him now, then?"

"I am sure he will be very much delighted—and I really think he deserves such a reward," answered the doctor, moving aside, and laying his hand on the handle of the door to open it for her. But as he did so, Madame Vacquant interposed.

"Stop," she said. "There must be no further risks run. Are you sure it is quite safe for him to be excited by seeing her?"

"Safe! Oh certainly, certainly," answered the doctor, who had a not uncommon *penchant* for pretty faces in general, and Miss Aylmer's in particular. Indeed, it will be the best thing possible to let him see with his own eyes that Miss Aylmer is all right. "His first question was whether you were safe," he added, looking at the young lady; "and I think he was decidedly incredulous of our replies. Show yourself to him at least, and his mind will be set at rest."

Madame Vacquant made no further demur, but when he opened the door, and Valerie entered the chamber, she only waited to say a few words and then hastily followed.

The surgeon who had set the fractured limb, and one or two servants, were in the room, but Valerie paid no attention to them. She walked straight across the floor, and did not pause until she stood by the richly-carved and luxurious bed, gazing down on

Romney's white face—the face whiter by far than the snowy pillows on which it rested.

He looked almost as if he were dead, so rigid and colorless were his features; but the breath came perceptibly, almost audibly through the parted lips, and more than once, while she stood there, a slight convulsion as of pain passed over the face. The eyelids did not lift, however; and when at last Valerie heard the rustle of a woman's dress, and knew that his mother stood beside her, she whispered, without turning her head—

"Is he insensible?"

Before Madame Vacquant could answer, the darkly-fringed lids flew up, and the violet eyes opened full and wide on her face. For a moment there was almost incredulous surprise in their gaze—then a smile came over the pale lips.

"So they told me the truth. You are quite safe!" he said, faintly.

She knelt down by the bedside and covered his uninjured hand with both her own. "Yes, I am quite safe," she said. "But it breaks my heart to look at you and think—it is all my fault."

"No, no," he said, eagerly; "you must not think that, even for a moment. It is not your fault, or—or if it was, it does not matter. I am not much hurt, and I shall soon be well again."

"You are suffering now — that is enough."

"I am not suffering now. I would not change places at this moment—" he grasped firmly the hands that were holding his—"with any one in the world."

He did not try to restrain the passion in his voice; and, as he spoke, there rushed over Valerie the recollection of her grandfather's words a few minutes before: "Take care that you never inflict a deeper injury than any you have caused to-day!" At another time she would have known exactly how to repress any undue exhibition of feeling like this; but now—how could she do it now? Let him disclaim as he might, she knew that it was her fault alone that he lay stricken and injured before her; and to be cold to one who had suffered and would yet suffer so much for her wilfulness and caprice, was more than she could do. Let us hope that it was more than any woman could have done.

"I think I shall never forgive myself," she said, after a moment's pause. "It is a mercy that you are alive—a mercy for which I can never be sufficiently thankful!—and the horses nearly killed Captain Darcy, too."

"Darcy! What did he have to do with them?"

She saw that he knew nothing about her rescue; and, remembering his jealous dislike of Darcy, she felt sorry for having spoken of the matter—but it was too late now. She must go on. He would have to hear the particulars sooner or later, and he had better hear them now while she could soften the blow to him.

"Did you not know that he stopped them?" she asked. "I don't know where he came from, but he was at the gates, and—and he stopped them."

"Darcy!"

It was all he said; but a deep flush of mortified feeling came over his face, and his eyes closed again. This was the end of it, then! He had been thrown aside and left behind, helpless and useless, while Darcy was the hero of the adventure! On Darcy fell all the honor and glory of the occasion! It was hard—it was bitterly hard—and it seemed all at once to take away even the consolation of Valerie's presence, and to give a sharper edge to every throb of pain in the fractured limb.

With the quickness of her sex, Valerie read these thoughts, and her own rebellious chafing against the fate that had made Darcy her rescuer caused her to do more than comprehend—to sympathize with them. If all had been equal between the two, in the way of her personal liking, she would have felt most warmly toward the one who had all the suffering and none of the glory; but as it was, her whole heart went out with a rush in the endeavor to comfort him.

"Captain Darcy was very hard on me," she said, softly. "I don't think he will soon, if ever, forgive me the trouble I cost him. I—I cannot help wishing that it had been any one else who chanced to stop the horses."

The violet eyes opened again on her face —this time full of sadness and pain.

"But he saved your life! And I was lying, like a helpless log, far away."

"Julian!"

She uttered the name almost involuntarily—then smiled at his start, and went on:

"May I call you that? I almost feel as if we were blood kindred, and quite near enough for it. Well—Julian, I wonder you can be so foolish. I wonder you can pain me by mentioning my debt to you, and my debt to Captain Darcy, in the same breath. He saved my life, it is true, but he saved it as he might have saved the life of any stranger who had crossed his path; indeed, not half so graciously as he would probably have done that. My obligation to him would never have been willingly incurred, and is an unutterable weight to me; while my obligation to you—to you, who have suffered, and are suffering, merely for my whim—ah, can I tell you what that is?"

He smiled a little.

"I am afraid I will never win the favor, though. This—" he glanced toward his injured arm—"does not look much like dering-do."

For an instant, she did not comprehend him. Then a recollection of the gay nonsense they had been talking, just before the horses put a summary end to their conversation, flashed across her. In a moment her fingers went up to her throat—the next, a knot of bright ribbon was lying in his hand.

It was just at this juncture that the surgeon touched the arm of Madame Vacquant, who had walked away from the bed and stood by a window not far off, looking out at the falling snow, with a strange, absent kind of gaze.

"I am sorry to disturb such an interesting conversation as the one yonder seems to be," he said, with a dry smile; "but I must really beg you to take the young lady away. She is exciting our patient too much, I fear."

Madame Vacquant turned hurriedly. "I was afraid of that," she said. "It was Dr. Preston, not I, who let her come in. He thought it would set Julian's mind at rest to see that she was safe."

"S—o! She was the lady he was driving?"

"Yes."

"Humph!" said the surgeon; and he looked round at Valerie, with his quick, keen glance. "I could warrant her for being at the bottom of any harm or mischief whatever," he thought. Then he said aloud: "I must beg you to send her away, at all events. His mind has been set at rest now, and that is sufficient."

Madame Vacquant needed no further bidding. She walked forward at once, and laid her hand on Valerie's shoulder.

"You must go," she said, without taking the trouble to soften the command at all. "Dr. Warner says you are exciting Julian too much. You must go!"

Julian uttered an exclamation of impatience; but Valerie rose to her feet without an instant's loss of time.

"I am sorry," she said. "I did not mean to excite him. Yes, I know I must go. I only meant to stay a minute," she added, looking at Romney. "Of course, I knew it would not do.—You must be quiet, and oh, do try to get better soon. I shall be so miserable—thinking of your suffering!"

"I must certainly try to get better soon, then," he said. "That you should be miserable on account of my sufferings would double them at least. But you will come back again—will you not?"

Fortunately, Madame Vacquant gave no time for reply to this. She had already drawn Valerie away, and the young lady—who even in that moment of excitement had no idea of forgetting *les convenances* far enough to promise to play romantic nurse to her wounded knight—was spared the difficulty of expressing a refusal. Before she knew what she was about, she had left the room, and was standing in the corridor with Madame Vacquant. The latter spoke first.

"Excuse me if I was abrupt—but I cannot run any risk, you know. The doctor told me to take you away."

"Run any risk! I should think not, indeed!" said Valerie. And then, for the

first time in her life, she put her arms round her grandfather's wife and kissed her. "Try to forgive me," she whispered. "I am so very sorry."

The tone was full of the most sincere contrition—all the more sincere, because the words were so simple—and might have touched the elder woman, if any thing possibly could have done so. But her face scarcely changed by a shade, and, when she turned and laid her lips on the girl's cheek, with a light, cold caress, Valerie felt instinctively that the mother's heart was mailed in steel against her.

"I have nothing to forgive," she said; "hardly even a right to blame. It was my fault as much as yours. I should have listened to Maurice Darcy."

Maurice Darcy! That name seemed destined to meet Valerie at every turn—stabbing her with a sharp remembrance of the discomfiture which she could not help feeling as if she owed to him. In a moment, at sound of it, all her softer feelings vanished; and she drew back, biting her lip.

"Captain Darcy ought to be gratified," she said. "Accident chanced to justify his opinion of the horses, and immediately everybody exalts him to the highest pedestal of wisdom and heroism. For my part—"

She stopped short—blushing violently, despite herself—for Darcy, who had come down the thickly-carpeted corridor quite unheard, paused at this moment beside Madame Vacquant.

At first, Valerie hoped that he had not caught the tenor of her interrupted speech, he looked so entirely as usual, so little as he might have been expected to look, under the circumstances; but, the next moment, she saw a gleam in his eye that she knew very well—a gleam, half-amused, half-satiric—which made her heart sink for very shame until it could sink no lower. She knew then that her hope was vain, and that, although he had presence of mind enough to suppress any outward tokens of the fact, he had certainly overheard her. With this dismaying consciousness pressing on her—dismaying necessarily, since she was, at least, thoroughly aware of the extent of her obligations to the man who had stood between herself and a horrible death—it was not wonderful that she was hardly able to pay any attention to what he said, that she had only a vague idea of his inquiries about Julian, and his explanation that he had only just arrived with the thoroughbreds, or that she gave a quick start, when at last he turned to herself.

"I hope you followed my advice about the wine, Miss Aylmer? You look very pale, and this afternoon's work will, I fear, prove to have been too much for you."

"I have not taken it yet, but I will go now and send for it," said Valerie, with most unusual meekness. Then she bent her head and hurried away—never once pausing or looking back, until she found herself safely locked in her own chamber, where, sitting down in the first convenient chair, she finished at her leisure that salutary fit of weeping which M. Vacquant had temporarily stopped. When she was aroused at last by the first dinner-bell, and, ringing for Fanchette, sent her down with an excuse for her own non-appearance, even Darcy might have thought that her pale, tear-stained countenance looked as if she had been punished enough.

It is scarcely necessary to dwell on the convalescence which followed this accident. After having nearly broken his neck, and quite broken his arm, Miss Aylmer felt very truly that she would have been the most ungracious and ungrateful of human beings, if she had kept up her intended reserve with Romney, or had not endeavored, by every means in her power, to lighten the hours of his captivity. So, when he recovered sufficiently to leave his own chamber, and lie day after day on a broad, low couch in his mother's private sitting-room, she set herself studiously to the task of entertaining him. She read to him, sang to him, talked to him, with an *abandon* which came of her self-reproach and desire to make atonement. but which was so charming in itself that it might well have turned an older and a wiser head. Naturally, therefore, it turned Romney's. Naturally, also, they grew to be very intimate with one another, to exercise the right of

tutoiment which their near connection gave, to glide from amusement into sentiment, and from sentiment into—neither of them very well knew what, without anybody taking the trouble to interfere or reprove.

Madame Vacquant of course saw what was going on, but it is not uncharitable to suppose that it tallied too exactly with her own wishes for her to desire, far less to attempt, any disturbance of the work of fate —while, as for M. Vacquant, he had delivered himself of one warning, and, man-like, he thought that would prove sufficient. Indeed, as far as regarded any serious danger, he was wholly blind. In his eyes, his granddaughter was peerless, and his stepson a pretty, spoiled boy. That the latter should like the former was, of course, to be expected, and that the former should encourage the liking was, perhaps, excusable, considering that it is the nature of women to be foolish; but of any serious consequences to their manifest flirtation, he never once dreamed. If anybody had hinted such a thing, he would indeed have been simply incredulous. There was a great deal of the *grand seigneur* about him, and he could not, or did not, realize that matters had changed in these latter days, and, with manners, many other things that he had been trained to reverence. He had received one sharp lesson in his life about attempting to carry out his *noblesse-oblige* theory in all its bearings, and to force a woman's inclination where it had no mind to go; but, as is too often the case, this lesson had not made him wiser. He was ready and anxious to play the same part over again with his granddaughter, that he had already played without success, in the case of his sister. He remembered how women were trained in France to take the husband which competent authority provided for them, and to love, honor, and obey, exactly that person who seemed most desirable to the head of the house; and he was still unable to realize the different canon that regulated another country. It seemed good to him that Valerie should marry Maurice Darcy, and he could not credit any possible objection on her part. It was true that they were within the forbidden degrees of kindred, but, with all the weighty reasons for an alliance taken into consideration, he was sure that they could easily obtain a dispensation; and, in every other respect, the plan was unimpeachable. It was also true that he had been a good deal surprised and somewhat shocked to hear Valerie declare that she "despised" and "hated" this desirable *parti;* but then, she had spoken in a moment of excitement, and some faint remembrance of the manner in which the wise old Vicar of Wakefield read backward his daughter's expressed opinions, floating through M. Vacquant's remembrance, he had hoped that even these unpromising expressions might be favorably construed. A woman's dislike, anyhow, he felt inclined to shrug his shoulders over as a mere *bagatelle.* Valerie was spoiled, and Maurice was rather uncompromising—that was all! They would get on all the better for the difference; indeed, *La petite* sadly needed a little control, a little wholesome awe of somebody to keep her caprice and coquetry in check.

This was the manner in which M. Vacquant reasoned, and the manner in which, almost unconsciously, he consoled himself for his granddaughter's perverse mode of conduct. It was true that she and Darcy rarely noticed each other at all, and never without eliciting some clang or jar of feeling; and it was also true that, day by day, Romney advanced to a closer degree of privileged intimacy with her—but still M. Vacquant was aware that he had announced his sovereign will and pleasure; and, therefore, although this nonsense might be a rather dangerous amusement, he could not bring himself to the serious contemplation of any serious harm occurring from it. Nevertheless, it suddenly one day occurred to him that he might as well enlighten Darcy concerning the matrimonial project of which as yet the latter was profoundly ignorant, and, with him, action was not slow upon resolve. In the course of an hour he had called Maurice into the library and made his announcement rather grandiosely than otherwise. To his utter amazement, it was met by a short and decisive refusal

"I suppose you mean kindly, sir," the latter said, "but, once for all, the thing is impossible. Once for all, I must earnestly request that my name may not be considered in connection with your future testamentary arrangements—much less, considered with reference to any such plan as this. Were I ten times as poor a man as I am, I should not desire a woman who accepted me, or whom I accepted, as a mercenary compromise! You need not start, sir; I do Miss Aylmer the justice to believe that she would repudiate the idea as quickly as I, and I would quite as soon put my hand in the fire as to insult her by such a proposition."

M. Vacquant bit his lip angrily, and perhaps at that moment felt little inclination to say that General Aylmer had not spoken as if his granddaughter would be insulted by such a proposition.

"You are exciting yourself unnecessarily," he said, coldly. "I have little intention of forcing either my fortune or my granddaughter on an unwilling recipient of either. As for mercenary compromise—that is quite a novelesque phrase; but I confess I don't understand it in its present application. Nothing was further from my intention than forcing anybody's inclination. I paid you the compliment of thinking you might please Valerie if you chose to try, and *she* has certainly proved fascinating to men as wise as yourself."

"Pardon me," Darcy said, a little contritely. "I suppose I did speak more warmly than occasion demanded—it is a bad fault of mine—but I have neither taken, nor meant to give, offence. Indeed, how could I be otherwise than grateful for your consideration of me? I only meant what I now repeat with more humility than pride—it is impossible. Your kindness blinds you to the insurmountable obstacles opposing such a plan."

"What obstacles?" his uncle asked, sharply. This plan had lain so long near to his heart, that the disappointment was keen to him.

"There are many; but two will suffice," Darcy answered, quietly. "In the first place, you are mistaken in thinking that I could ever please Miss Aylmer. Were I ready to-day for the *rôle* of suitor, I would play to no purpose, as far as she is concerned. I do her only justice when I say that not even the glamour of an inheritance could make her look favorably upon me. In the second place, you must pardon me if this sounds ungracious—I should never choose Miss Aylmer out of the world of women as my wife. Perhaps, the fault lies in my own insensibility—since, as you say, wiser and better men than I have found her fascinating; but I scarcely think I shall ever choose any woman half so fatally tempted by the dower of beauty."

"This is the first time that I ever heard a man—and a painter to boot—quarrel with a woman's good looks."

"It is not the looks I quarrel with, sir, but the use made of them."

"Ah, she *is* something of a coquette; but what pretty wóman is not? And matrimony is a sure cure for the worst cases of that."

"Do you think so? My experience goes rather the other way. At least, I should have neither patience nor inclination to play Petruchio to a Kate who flirted instead of scolded. I think, indeed, that of the two I would prefer the shrew, since she, at least, would not play fast and loose with—but, once more, it is doing Miss Aylmer a great wrong to bring her name, even indirectly, into such a discussion. Don't think me churlish, sir, when I beg you to draw up your will without any reference to me; and assure you, indeed, that the only favor you can do me, is to leave my name out of it. Now let us consider the matter finally at an end."

"If it must be"—began M. Vacquant, with a sigh.

"It must, indeed," said the other, firmly. "And now, if you will allow me to ask one question: has Miss Aylmer heard of this plan?"

The old Frenchman hesitated; but in all his threescore years he had never knowingly spoken a falsehood, so, after a pause, he answered in the affirmative, adding, "Why do you ask?"

"Only because I would like to disabuse her of a false impression as far as I am con-

cerned," his nephew answered. "I would have set her mind at ease some time since by assuring her that she had nothing to fear from my rivalry in your good graces, but that it seemed scarcely worth while to take the trouble, as I am leaving so soon."

At these words, M. Vacquant's face fell suddenly and strangely. "Leaving!" he repeated. "So you are going to torment me with that cry again. I think it very hard that you should treat me so, Maurice! —very hard indeed, that you cannot spare me a few months without continually agitating this subject. What is the matter that you cannot stay here, at least until spring?"

"You forget, sir, that this is an idle life, and that I am far from being an idle man; that I have, indeed, to make my bread by the labor of my hand."

"I have offered, again and again, to remove that necessity from you."

"I remember that gratefully, but you must indulge me in the obstinacy which prefers to retain it."

"Paint here, then!—what is to prevent your painting here?"

"Nothing to prevent my painting; but a great deal to prevent my remaining here. You surely forget that your own claim is a new one, and a slight one, compared to the other which is calling me away."

"No, I don't forget it," said M. Vacquant, in a voice which subdued itself at once; "but then, Maurice—you cannot say he needs you."

A sort of wistful look swept over the face at which he gazed, and sudden tenderness softened the gray eyes, making them almost beautiful.

"I need him," he said, softly, as if to himself. Then he turned to leave the room, but paused again in the door. "I fear I have not thanked you for your kindness as I should have done," he said. "But pray don't let my *brusquerie* make you forget that I *do* thank you, that I am very grateful for the affection you are kind enough to express for me, and that I hope to see you choose a better heir than I should be. I was never made for a rich man, and the burden of wealth would ill become me. Now I am going down to my studio; if you say so, I can call and see Payne about those stocks he wants you to invest in. Shall I tell him no, as decidedly as he deserves?"

"As decidedly as you please."

The next moment, the firm, steady footstep died away along the hall, and M. Vacquant leaned back in his chair, a very withered and old-looking man, sighing bitterly.

"So he puts *that* atonement out of my power," he said, half aloud. "Well, then, there is only the other. It is very bitter—very bitter—but I suppose that is part of my burden. Atonement!—restitution!—easy words for priests to say; but who among them all can mark the way to fulfilment?"

CHAPTER VII.

A DECLARATION—NOT OF LOVE.

While this discussion had been progressing in the library below, another of quite a different order was going on in Madame Vacquant's sitting-room above; was indeed still at its height when, hearing Darcy's step on the corridor outside, the lady opened the door and invited him to enter.

He complied, more for lack of a ready excuse to decline than for any other reason; yet the picture presented to his gaze was pretty enough to have tempted almost any one to enter for the mere sake of admiring it at a closer point of view. Through the half-open door he had something more than a glimpse of the room within—the room over whose luxurious and elegant appointments Madame Vacquant's taste reigned supreme—and he saw, with something of the effect of a stereoscopic picture, the graceful furniture, the white statues, and the gleaming picture-frames, as they were relieved by the rich toning of the carpet and walls. There was nothing heavy, nothing out of keeping or out of taste, in the apartment, but an indescribable harmony and cheerfulness pervaded all its arrangements; the latter, in part at least, owing to the bright flood of golden sunshine which was pouring through a large bay-window filled with plants, until it resembled a smal

conservatory, in the midst of which a canary was trilling loudly from its gilded cage. Near the window the piano stood, and at the piano Miss Aylmer sat, half-turned aside from the key-board, but with the sheets of music plentifully scattered about, proving what her occupation had been, while, in a deep chair by the side of the instrument, Romney reclined, his arm still hanging useless in a sling of crimson silk, which became him wonderfully, and his whole air one of such intense listlessness that Darcy set it down unhesitatingly to the score of affectation. He modified this judgment a little, however, when his first step in the room brought its warm air heavy-laden with fragrance rushing over him; and he was on the point of entering a protest against the injurious effects of over-heated apartments, when Madame Vacquant anticipated him by speaking.

"Do, Maurice, see if you can bring this perverse boy to hear reason. Valerie and I are going down-street, and he insists on accompanying us. Now, you know that will never do! The doctor—"

"*Au diable* with the doctor!" interrupted Julian, impatiently. "Really, I am tired of his very name, though of course he would have nothing to say in a matter of this kind. Indeed, why should he? He *is* a sensible man, though nobody would think so who listened to you, mamma. It has been three weeks since this con—troublesome arm was broken; and I should have been out a week ago, but that I was too lazy, and home was too pleasant."

"You did well to stay," said Valerie. "I give you fair warning you lose all your invalid privileges as soon as you cease to be an invalid."

"Now, you are trying to frighten me into good behavior," answered he, languidly. "But I flatter myself that your words are harder than your resolution. At all events, I mean to go down-street with you to-day."

"When I tell you that I don't want you?"

"Yes—for once—even when you tell me that you do not want me."

"I have a mind to stay at home myself, then."

"Do! We shall practise that duet from *Romeo é Giulietta* so charmingly!"

"Indeed, you need not fancy any thing of the kind. If I remain, it will only be to shut myself up by myself, until Madame Vacquant returns."

"You see how she rules me," said Julian, throwing himself back in his chair, with an air of mock resignation. "I am a lion led by a thread; I shall soon have no more volition left than—than a puppet!—Darcy, can't you say a word for me?"

"There is really not the least reason why he should not go," said Darcy, turning to Madame Vacquant. "He speaks very truly when he says that he might have gone a week ago."

"But the day," she said, hesitatingly. "It is so cold!"

Maurice shrugged his shoulders, with a laugh.

"I never heard of a fractured limb suffering on account of the depression of the thermometer," he said, good-humoredly. "Besides, it is not in any unpleasant degree."

"And you think there is positively no danger?"

"Positively, not the least."

"Then, Valerie, we had better get ready," she said, turning to that young lady.—"Maurice, if you are going down-street, you may as well wait for us. You can afford to do so, since we are going to walk; and—we are going to see your picture."

Darcy could not repress a slight start.

"My picture!" he repeated.

"Yes, your picture. Ah, you may well look detected and ashamed to think that all the city should be talking of it before we—your own friends and relations—ever even heard of its existence."

"It was only placed on exhibition yesterday," he said, apologetically. "Of course, I meant to ask you to see it—if you cared to do so. But I don't understand—how did you hear of it?"

"How did we hear of it! Have you not seen the *Gazette* this morning?"

"No."

She turned round, and, taking up a copy of the paper from a table near at hand, fold-

ed down the sheet at a particular place, and, pointing to the head of the paragraph, handed it to him. He took it in some surprise—surprise which perceptibly increased when he saw not less than a column of printed matter devoted to a critical and judicious notice of the picture concerning which Madame Vacquant had just spoken. He flushed slightly, as one whom praise has taken unawares, glanced his eye down over the terse, well-written sentences, and then looked up half-laughingly.

"This is some of Thornton's work," he said; "I recognize his tricks of the pen, and—there is no one else who would be half so flattering."

"Mr. Thornton is the best art-critic in the city," said Madame Vacquant, who was, when she chose, the best flatterer in the city. "If *he* is the writer of that article, of course there is no question of its correctness."

"That does not exactly follow," said Darcy, smiling; "for he took a fancy to this picture before it was finished; and so is fairly chargeable with partiality toward it. He *is* a good art-critic, though," he went on; "for besides being a brilliant writer, he is as thoroughly trained and cultivated, in an artistic sense, as a man can be with regard to a thing which is not the pursuit of his life. His criticism is always judicious, and his praise is worth having, because he knows what to praise, and how to praise it—which is more than can be said for nine-tenths of the scribblers who display their ignorance even more conspicuously than they display their ill-nature in every thing relating to art or artists."

"It is evident that Achilles has been touched on the heel in the past, if not in the present," said Julian, with his ready sneer, aside to Valerie.

"You are mistaken," said Darcy, whose ears were of the quickest, and who often discomfited people by overhearing things which were not intended for him. "I have never suffered much from criticism, because I have never been eminent enough to provoke it—but in the little which I have known, I cannot remember to have ever been even momentarily resentful of any thing that was just. Besides, I am thick-skinned, I suppose—at least I am singularly indifferent to the praise or blame of these mouth-pieces of the *cognoscenti*. But I have seen other and more sensitive natures suffer so keenly from their cut-and-thrust attacks, that I have learned to rate them as they deserve to be rated, and to remember that lions are sometimes stung to death by gnats."

"Yet, if I were an artist, I do not think I should mind them," said Valerie, looking up. "If I had the consciousness of genius to support me, they might say and do their worst. I would fight my way to fame by a longer, but a surer road; for, after all, it is the public, and not the critics, who build up an enduring renown."

"It was the public, perhaps, in the days when Cimabue painted his Madonnas, and when all Florence made a grand holiday, and strewed flowers in his path," answered Darcy; "but it is not the public in this age, and least of all, in this country. Even in the old-cultured centres of art, the critics lead opinion: here, they simply make it. If every one is not of the same mind with regard to a work of art, it is only because their oracles sometimes disagree, not because they take the liberty of judging for themselves concerning its merits."

"How very flattering you are!"

"Am I? Then it was quite unintentionally; for I did not think there could be flattery, or the reverse, in merely stating an admitted fact. The general rule in America is a want of artistic culture. But there is no general rule without exceptions; and, judging from my own experience, I should think these exceptions quite numerous."

"Judging from the *Gazette* this morning, perhaps you mean?"

"No: for I regard this more as the kindness of a friend than the decision of a critic. As I said before, however, I am very indifferent—too indifferent, I fear—to things of this kind. I work out a conception to the best of my ability, according to the manner in which it is given me; more than that I cannot do, at the bidding of all the critics who ever wrote. When I first began to use a brush—and that was as soon as I could use any thing—I chose for my own the motto of Van Eyck. You may remember it?"

"I don't think I do."

"It is '*Als ik kan!*'—'I'll do my best!' Having done my best, I can afford to care very little for what is said of my efforts. I am grateful for praise, especially intelligent praise"—his eye glanced toward the paper in his hand—"but I do not work to gain it. I am quite unmoved by fault-finding, be it ever so severe."

It was evident that he meant in the fullest sense all the words that he uttered; indeed, looking at him as he uttered them, nobody could have doubted the fact. It is either the intensely self-distrustful, or the intensely vain, who are easily affected by the outside influences of which he spoke; and, plainly, this man was neither the one nor the other. He was too firmly self-reliant for the first; too proud, in the best sense of the word, for the second. Not one of the three people listening to him had any cordial liking for him in their hearts; yet each one of them was forced into a belief of his sincerity, and a half-reluctant admiration of his simple, earnest creed—the creed so far removed from the morbid sensitiveness and overweening self-consciousness which is so often the curse of genius that it has grown to be recognized as one of its distinguishing characteristics. True, Julian curled his lip and shrugged his shoulders, as he would have done if Raphael himself had spoken; but even he felt the presence of something which had the ring of reality in it, and nobody spoke until Madame Vacquant at last said, lightly:

"You shame us all, my dear Maurice; for there are few people nowadays who take life or any thing about life in this spirit. It is terrible to consider how frivolous and skeptical we have become; and how the taint of cynicism is in every thing we do or say. As for you—you should have been born in the twelfth instead of the nineteenth century! You would have suited that exactly."

"You pay him a high compliment," said Valerie. Then she turned abruptly to Darcy. "Of course, you have read Montalembert's 'St. Elizabeth,' have you not?"

"Yes—long ago."

"And of course you remember and admire—who does not?—the matchless introduction, in which he gives a living, breathing picture of that age of faith where Madame Vacquant would place you?"

"Yes," he said, a little wonderingly.

"Well," said the young lady, rising as she spoke, and moving toward the door, which she opened, "I agree with her. I think you ought to have lived then. I think you would have suited that period. But I don't think you suit, or are likely to suit, the age of to-day."

The door closed in a way that gave emphasis to her last words, and effectually cut off all chance of reply, if Darcy had been disposed to make any. He was by this time used to Miss Aylmer's little amenities, so he only smiled, and then turned to Madame Vacquant.

"I am sorry to be obliged to hurry you, madame, but I have an engagement down-street in the course of the next hour or so, and I should not like to break it."

"I should not like you to break it on my account, certainly," answered the lady. "I will be ready in a few minutes."

She, in turn, left the room; and then, while Darcy was glancing his eye over Mr. Thornton's art critique, Julian roused himself from the depths of his chair and the depths of his languor sufficiently to say:

"I suppose I ought to go too. This"—looking down at his velvet morning-coat—"is not exactly *en règle* for Charles Street. What a deuce of a trouble it is—the continual dressing and undressing to which civilized humanity is doomed! If I ever commit suicide, it will certainly be from sheer weariness on this account. Darcy, my good fellow, I wonder if the sight of your picture will prove a sufficient reward for the exertion that lies before me?"

"I don't wonder any thing about it—I know it will not," answered Darcy, carelessly. "I hope you are not so foolish as to be going down to see my picture, Romney."

"I am, though—and why not?"

"Because I doubt if you would be repaid for the walk by a master-piece of Correggio—and I am sure you will not be any thing near repaid by the inspection of my handiwork."

"Don't you like it?"

"Of course I like it. In fact it is one of the few things I have ever painted, that satisfies me as much as one can be satisfied by one's own execution, I suppose. But you won't like it."

"Why not? Is it pre-Raphaelite?"

Darcy laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"No: I was infected with the Ruskin fever when I was a much younger man, and there has been time enough for the madness to partially subside; but it is not according to Hegel and Schelling either, and the absence of the Düsseldorf element will be a much graver fault in your eyes than the presence of any amount of pre-Raphaelitism, I suspect."

"I trust I am not hopelessly biassed in my admiration or my views."

"Most of us are, I think. But here is Miss Aylmer, and your coat yet unchanged."

Romney started, for, truly enough, the door had opened, and Miss Aylmer in full walking costume stood before him. He rose hastily, made the best excuse he could muster, and went hurriedly to perform his obnoxious toilet duties, while the young lady came forward with an air too negligent to have been quite natural.

"Pray don't put down your paper," she said, as Darcy laid aside the *Gazette*. "I am going straight to the piano—I always do when I am waiting—and I won't disturb you in the least. I know how provoking it is to be disturbed, especially when one is pleasantly engaged."

Whatever Darcy's other social shortcomings, want of tact was certainly not one of them. Some men would have been foolish enough to have persisted in laying aside the paper, and in forcing the fact of their presence upon a reluctant companion; but this man was never one to fall into such a vulgar error. On the contrary, he took up the *Gazette* again, and, with a quiet bend of the head in acknowledgment of the lady's consideration, devoted himself to the political-intelligence column with very edifying assiduity, while she sat down to the piano and amused herself with modulating the soft chords and harmonious of the "Consolation!"

They were still *tête-à-tête* in this interesting fashion when Madame Vacquant came back, and, Julian soon after following, they set forth.

Of course, there was no hesitation about the order of march. The elder lady took quiet but undisputed possession of Darcy, and entertained him with high-art criticisms and Ruskin quotations down the whole length of Charles Street, to the very door of that charming place of resort which was popularly known as "French's," and officially as the "Art Emporium." Here Romney suddenly excused himself. "Since I have come thus far," he said, "I might as well go a little farther, and see one or two troublesome people on a troublesome matter of business. I will be back in about half an hour. I suppose you will have exhausted your raptures by that time, and I can admire the picture at my leisure."

He lifted his hat—bowed—smiled—vanished—while the others, by no means disconsolate at his departure, entered the serene and somewhat dim region (it would be sacrilege to call it a shop), the popularity of which as a lounging resort needed no explanation after a single glance at the vista of beauty which opened at once on the gaze. It speaks well for the taste of the multitude that, provided they can obtain the luxury free of cost, they always like to be surrounded by things that embody the beautiful; and that, even in a community which is substantially unheedful and unappreciative of art, any gallery thrown open to the public is sure of being well patronized by sight-seers. Wise legislators and wise philanthropists, knowing this, provide such places of resort, and so, by indirect means, educate the popular taste, and, by slow degrees, bring into the barren popular life some of the softening and grace that comes alone of beauty as we know it in art; but, such legislators and such philanthropists being rarer than precious jewels in America, the careless majority, as well as the art-loving minority, are fair to content themselves with and be grateful for such substitutes as this "Emporium" of Mr. French. Yet there have been worse ones, even in an artistic sense. It was certainly a beautiful place—a place

where pictures in gleaming frames rose tier after tier on the walls; where groups of statuary, in all their white motionless grace, met the eye on every side; where alabaster vases and Parian statuettes abounded; and where there were always to be found the finest specimens of *marqueterie* and the rarest trifles of *vertu* that enterprise could command or wealth obtain — a place, too, where the real connoisseur was always certain of being able to find good paintings at terms not—well, not extravagant. If Mr. French demanded a good price for a good thing, it was no more than he had an undoubted right to do; and people who spent their annual thousands on dresses and horses and jewels, had the grace not to grumble overmuch at the necessity of paying a few hundreds now and then for the privilege of hanging a picture worth calling a picture on their walls—especially since they knew that these hundreds would go to the artist, and not to the convenient agent who transacted the business and pocketed the profits. From this well-known and very common character Mr. French was indeed as completely distinct as it is possible to imagine two things. He was far less dealer than gentleman, far less merchant than liberal patron and lover of art. In his eyes, the laborer was always worthy of his hire; and no artist had ever known him buy a picture for one price and triple or quadruple the amount when he sold it to some wealthy dilettant. "Fair profits are one thing," he was accustomed to say, "and gross robbery is quite another. I would as soon steal a man's purse as to buy his picture for a song and sell it for a fortune." And no one had ever been able to say that these principles belied themselves. On the contrary, he had made many a noble outlay, and done many a generous deed which his right hand—that is, the world—never suspected, but which those whom he benefited not only knew, but remembered so well, that his praises were sounded far and wide among the genial art brotherhood.

Groups of people were loitering about, admiring various pictures, criticising various statuettes, moving softly, and speaking with the well-modulated voice of well-bred conversation, when the two ladies attended by Darcy entered. They did not pause, however, but passed directly up a flight of stairs to a room above—a room that was evidently the adytum of this sanctuary of art. It could not have been called a gallery, for it was of moderate size, finished with the simple elegance of a drawing-room, and containing only three or four pictures, together with a beautiful marble group which occupied the centre of the floor. But even a tyro's glance would have seen at once that each of the three or four pictures were works of the highest excellence, and the names attached were of world-wide fame; yet none of them at present occupied the place of honor—a position at the head of the room where the light fell broad, and full from a carefully-toned sky-window—this was reserved for the new painting, before which an attentive group were standing when the three entered.

"Pray, let us wait until those people go," said Valerie, sinking down on a divan. "If there is one thing I detest more than another, it is looking at a picture over half a dozen shoulders."

"I am rather tired, and a rest will be pleasant," said Madame Vacquant, following her example.—"Maurice, don't let us detain you. I see Mr. French wants to speak to you."

She gave a gracious bow to the pleasant-faced, gentlemanly man, who came forward from the group aforesaid, and drew Darcy aside; then sank back, and devoted herself to a landscape opposite, until the knot of people passed from before the picture, and, with a few last words to Darcy, Mr. French accompanied them from the room. Then Maurice came forward. A vainer man, or a man more distrustful of his own powers, might have been fluttered by the ordeal before him; but he only smiled quietly, as he said:

"Will you both come and tell me what you think of my work?"

They both came and stood before it—each secretly steeled against admiration. This was what they saw:

A deep woodland glade—a sort of dell it seemed—in the heart of an almost tropical forest. Save for the want of sufficient depth

of coloring, and the lack of gorgeous parasites, the character of the scenery might have been identified with that of Mexico or Brazil, but as it was—with the fresh, emerald verdure, the familiar forms of the well-known forest-trees, the graceful swinging creepers, and, farther back, the long, draping gray moss that gave its only funereal aspect to the scene—there was no mistaking the royal forest that, with little break or change of character, clothes our fair land, from the Potomac to the Rio Grande; deepening only in luxuriance and beauty as it sweeps down from the green Carolina hills to the golden sands of the Mexic Gulf. Far back into dim distance stretched a wall of living green, but the foreground of the picture was entirely occupied by the nook that formed an island in the midst of this ocean of tangled verdure. Here the light fell soft and dim through the shade of overhanging boughs, and the short turf was green and smooth as any garden lawn; here, also, it was evident that the artist had striven to embody the exuberant fulness of rejoicing with which Nature sometimes breaks forth, filling all inanimate creation with that pulse of joy which thrilled it on the creation morning. The spring that bubbled up between the roots of a giant live-oak, the graceful willow that bent to touch the stream, as it glided away, the flowering vines that fringed its course, the large moss-covered stones, the fresh, emerald grass, the golden sunbeams that glinted and quivered down through the thick canopy of leaves, the bright-eyed bird that arched its dainty neck to drink a fairy draught of water, even the lizard that sunned itself luxuriously on a fallen log—had all been touched by a brush that lingered lovingly and carefully over each detail. And, in the midst of this glad and lavish loveliness, there lay stretched the dead figure of a soldier—thrown as if in the careless grace of slumber beside the stream. There were no signs of strife to mar the sylvan quiet, no trampled grass, nor bloody tokens of mortal hate, and deadly carnage—only the overflowing vitality of Nature in contrast with the man who, like a wounded hart, had crept to this covert to die—only Life mocking the still presence of Death. The uniform was that of a private in the Confederate army — the worn and faded gray—but no roughness of costume could conceal the fact that it was a gentleman who had lain down there to die. There was not a personal mark that did not tell the story of gentle blood and gentle rearing. The slender build of form, the finely-tapering extremities, the white and delicate hand thrown up over the soft, silken curls, and the clear, handsome outline of face (the gazer could almost *see* the gray death-shade stealing over it, and feel how proud and beautiful those dark eyes must have been before the long lashes fell over them forever), were all eloquent of culture, hereditary as well as personal. One glove lay on the grass, and near it the soldier's overturned cup; while, farther away, the carbine rested where it had dropped from the failing grasp. The other clinched hand held a handkerchief to the ghastly wound upon the chest, from which a dark-red tide poured on the velvet mosses; and over the whole picture brooded a pathos unutterable. Few eyes could have looked on it undimmed, and it was not strange that, after a moment, Valerie was raining a shower of tears beneath her veil, while even Madame Vacquant was subdued and silent. When she did at last speak, it was in that hushed tone which involuntarily we adopt in a death-chamber, for truly it seemed more as if the reality than the shadow was present here.

"Maurice, it is beautiful—it is wonderful! I almost feel as if the poor fellow had just died before me! But what is the name of it?"

"Missing," he answered, briefly.

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

"What more would you have?" asked Valerie, speaking with an effort. "Only it reminds me of something—I scarcely know what."

"Perhaps I can tell you," said Darcy, with a smile. "Is it not of an anonymous poem which appeared during the war under that title? I thought it exquisite; and it suggested this to me."

"Yes—I remember now," she said. And then in a low voice, often broken, she repeated two verses:

'In the cool, sweet hush of a wooded nook,
Where the May-buds sprinkle the green old sward,
And the winds, and the birds, and the limpid brook,
Mingle their strains with a drowsy sound,
Who lies so still in the plushy moss—
His pale face pressed on a grassy pillow—
Just where the light and the shadows cross,
In the flickering fringe of the willow—
Who lies, alas!
So still, so chill, in the whispering grass?

"'A soldier clad in Zouave dress,
A bright-haired man, with his lips apart!
One hand thrown up o'er the frank, dead face,
The other clutching his pulseless heart,
Lies here in the shadows cool and dim,
His musket swept by a trailing bough,
With a careless grace in each quiet limb—
But a wound on the manly brow—
A wound, alas!
Whence the warm blood drips on the quiet grass!'"

After that, they were silent a long time.

Finally, however, Madame Vacquant looked at her watch, and said that she must go. She remembered a dozen things she wanted, and especially that she meant to look in at Easter's, and see if it was possible to find there a piece of velvet that matched her purple silk. She turned to Miss Aylmer.

"Valerie, will you come? We can leave a message with Mr. French, telling Julian where to find us."

"I believe I would rather remain, if you will excuse me," said Valerie. "Easter's is farther down, is it not? Then you call for me on your return. I have not seen half enough of this picture yet."

She kept her seat on the sofa that Darcy had wheeled forward, with evidently not the least intention of stirring; so Madame Vacquant looked at Maurice. "Do you stay too?" she asked, a little significantly.

Before he could reply, Valerie answered promptly:

"No. I would not think of keeping Captain Darcy. Pray take him with you, for it cannot be very interesting to sit and look at one's own picture."

"More interesting than you would imagine," he said, with a laugh; but he added, turning to Madame Vacquant: "Of course I am at your service for Easter's or elsewhere."

She accepted the offer very graciously, and they left the room together. Then Valerie leaned back with a deep sigh of relief, and, resting her cheek on her hand, looked steadily at the canvas before her—looked until the lines wavered and grew dim, and the pale, handsome face of the dead soldier seemed resting in a mist. She had only just raised her hand to dash away the obtrusive tears, when a familiar step made her turn quickly, and she faced Darcy, who was entering the room.

Perhaps she did not care to dissemble her not-very-well-pleased surprise. Her first words were:

"I thought you accompanied Madame Vacquant."

"Madame Vacquant was kind enough to dispense with my attendance," he said. "She found Mrs. Jennings down-stairs, and they have gone together, after agreeing that I would doubtless make but a poor appraiser of silks and laces. So I came back—glad to find you still alone."

Now, in the course of her life, a great many people, at a great many different times, had been glad to find Valerie alone; so that the formula was quite a familiar one to her ears. But it was certainly the last she had ever expected to hear from Maurice Darcy. Of course she did not misunderstand him, or fancy, for a moment, that whatever he wished with her could bear a tender significance; but still, all things considered, it was scarcely wonderful that the large eyes opened in her astonishment.

"Yes," she said. "Of course I am still alone. Did you expect to find any one with me?"

"No," he answered, with his cool, quiet smile, which she never exactly understood, and therefore never exactly fancied. "But, luck favors me so seldom—and this is luck—that I can afford to be incredulous when there does come a manifestation. May I sit down? I have something to say to you which I hope will not take very long; but one may as well talk at one's ease."

She bent her head a little, and swept back her flowing draperies, so as to leave the other end of the divan clear; then she said carelessly:

"I confess I am at a loss to imagine

what you can possibly have to say to me in —in this way."

"You would hardly be likely to guess," he said, with another flitting smile. "It is seldom, I fancy, that you have been entertained by matters so prosaic as legacies and rights of inheritance. Nay, you need not start"—she had started very perceptibly—"I will not bore you if I can help it."

But here she interrupted him, her face flushing slightly:

"I don't know that you need trouble yourself to explain any thing, Captain Darcy. I already understand the nature of our conflicting claims, and, if the matter at all rested with me, would be perfectly willing to waive mine—but it does not do so. Grandpapa alone can decide about his future arrangements; and you must excuse me if I decline entering into a discussion from which no good can possibly ensue."

She spoke in her usual clear, silvery tone, fluently and without hesitation. Darcy heard her to the close, and then answered calmly:

"And you must excuse me if I still press my desire to be heard. Perhaps I had better begin by explaining that you totally misunderstand all that I wish to say. You speak of 'conflicting claims'—there I must beg leave to correct you. No claims of mine do, or possibly can, conflict with yours."

She looked up at him—thinking in her heart, the while, that he was even a subtler schemer than she had fancied, or else he would not attempt to split hairs in this way, and waved her hand with a slight gesture of scorn, as she answered:

"What does it matter? You know what I mean—even although I may have used terms that were a shade incorrect. I do not see that it makes any material difference whether you have a claim on grandpapa, or whether he enriches you by his own free will. Once more, believe me that the matter is not of sufficient importance to me for your definitions to prove of interest."

"And once more I must be uncivil enough to force them on you," he said, beginning in turn to speak a little haughtily. "At least," and the tone softened down again, "for your sake. No, pray don't speak—" as Valerie unclosed her lips evidently with that intention—"we shall never get forward, if we keep on talking at cross-purposes. Let me make matters clear, and then you may answer what you please. It will not take me many minutes to do so, for I have not much to say."

Still he paused—as if rather uncertain how to say even that much. But Valerie gave him no assistance. She only leaned back silently, waiting for him to speak. After a moment, he resumed—dashing at once and very summarily into the heart of his subject:

"I believe you regard me as a mercenary schemer, endeavoring to deprive you of your inheritance. I do not resent the suspicion. It is perhaps natural, for you do not know me. But I ask you to dismiss that apprehension entirely and forever. I have never had the least intention of accepting any bequest from my uncle. What his intention has been, I do not know, nor does it matter—since I have already told him explicitly that he must not put my name in his will."

The firm, clear tones paused at those words, and Valerie looked up with a start.

"I am sorry to hear that," she said, still coldly, but with some appearance of interest. "I have been thinking what a good thing it was that grandpapa had found an heir who seemed to suit him so well. As for me, I regret that you, that any one, for that matter, should consider me so mercenary as to have been coveting this money and not wishing you to have it. As I understand the matter, grandpapa withheld his sister's fortune, and it is only right—it is only common honesty—that he should restore it to her representative. I have thought so ever since I heard any thing about it. I should indeed feel very great contempt for myself if I had thought any thing else."

She spoke quietly, almost indifferently, toying the while with the tassels of her muff; and, when she finished, sank back again into her former languid attitude. From this, however, Darcy's next words roused her perceptibly—spoken as they were very simply:

"This morning my uncle—who seems to share your opinion about conflicting claims—proposed to me a mode of compromise which I should never think of mentioning to you if he had not said that you were already aware of his wishes on the subject. I see you know what I mean."

He might well see, since the blood surged up to the very roots of her hair, and her hand, closing over the silken cord with which she was toying, snapped it quite in two. When she lifted her eyes, they were all ablaze with indignation.

"Yes, I have heard of it," she said. "Do I need to tell you what I thought of it?"

"No," he answered. "I have never done you such great injustice as to require a word on the subject. Of course, I knew that you would only reject the proposition. But then you did not know that I would be inclined to do likewise; and you might very naturally—perhaps you have—feared serious annoyance from me."

Here she interrupted him. "You are mistaken. I have never yet feared or endured serious annoyance from any one."

"I beg your pardon, then," he said. "I only thought it probable that I might account in this way for much that has been repellent in your manner toward me. I thought that perhaps you meant to mark decidedly the absence of hope for me; and that it would be well if I put your mind at rest on the subject, by assuring you that I have never for a moment entertained any intention of becoming a suitor for your hand; and furthermore"—the speaker could not restrain this—"that no such intention is at all possible in the future."

Now, it chanced that Valerie possessed a very keen sense of humor, and this statement, at once so explicit and so earnest, struck her with such a sudden sense of the ludicrous, that even vanity was, for the moment, subordinate to amusement, and she startled her companion by an irresistible peal of laughter.

"Pray forgive me," she said, after a moment—for it is surprising how a hearty laugh can scatter the mists of ill-humor—"but I really could not help it. I have never in my life been rejected before, and something must be allowed for the novelty of the sensation. You are very kind, but do you think it was necessary to be quite so candid and uncompromising?"

"I have always found plain speaking answer best," he replied. "It was an uncomplimentary explanation, but I fancied you would pardon the incivility for the sake of the truth. Once for all, set your mind at rest with regard to your inheritance, and believe that you have neither a rival nor a lover to fear in me."

He spoke the last words decidedly, and rose at their conclusion. Evidently he had said his say, and meant to go, if Valerie had not made a motion to detain him. With all her faults, there was not in her an atom of the false pride which cannot freely acknowledge an error; so, after a moment, she spoke—hurriedly, as if somewhat doubting her own resolution, but bravely, as if determined to go through with it:

"You are perfectly right, Captain Darcy. Plain speaking *is* best; so I hope you will not be surprised that I follow your example, and give you a return of it. The project of which you only heard this morning, I was informed of before I left home; and I am sure you need be at no loss to imagine the consequences—even if you had not seen them. I came here against my will, to be placed on exhibition before a man to whom my hand had been offered, as I supposed! That was a pleasant position, don't you think so? Well, the result was, that I tried to show you that I had no part in such a plan, and that you might keep the fortune forever and a day without my sending a sigh after it. You say that I considered you a mercenary schemer? Frankly, I did. I thought you were here to acquire and retain influence over grandpapa; and, although I never grudged you the fortune—part of it at least, I thought your right—still I felt very sincere contempt for the fortune-seeker. I now recognize the injustice of these opinions, and I am not ashamed to beg your pardon for them."

Half-proudly, but very gracefully, she held out her hand, with a gesture which the veriest churl could scarcely have disregarded; and which made Darcy appreciate,

as he had never done before, her singular power of fascination. He only held the little pearl-gloved member for a moment, however; then released it, saying:

"You are very good—but we won't speak of pardon at all, if you please. I don't blame you in the least for your opinion—as I said before, it was very natural, and scarcely mattered to me at all. I should never have cared to make this explanation for my own sake."

Valerie looked up, biting her lip a little. Indeed, such a tone would have been apt to irk most women. "I cannot sufficiently admire your frankness," she said, with a very decided dash of sarcasm.

"Don't trouble yourself to do so," Darcy answered, with a pleasant laugh. "People who admired my frankness would find a good deal to occupy them. And now I leave you to the solitude which I interrupted. Will you be kind enough to make my excuses to Madame Vacquant, and say that a business engagement prevents my accompanying her home?"

Valerie bent her head, and, as she made no answer, nor any effort to detain him, he left the room.

For the next five minutes, Miss Aylmer's face was a study—amusement, vexation, surprise, and pique, were so plainly mingled there. Then they all suddenly cleared away, and the dark eyes lifted themselves clear and bright, while the lips unclosed in a low laugh.

"So my opinion 'scarcely mattered at all!'" she said, with the glance of a challenged champion. "Truly, I begin to think this haughty gentleman needs a lesson—in good manners, at least. It may prove worth while to give it to him—I have rather a fancy for a man who does not lower his flag at once—and then he can remember for his comfort *rira bien que rira le dernier!*"

It is almost useless to say that to will and to do—in matters of conquest—were quite the same thing with the speaker; but, if she could have foreseen what this resolution was to cost herself and others, she might, perhaps, for once, have paused. She did not foresee it, however; and so she walked on to the end. Doubtless we all do that, but it goes doubly hard with us when that end—if it be a dark or bitter one—is of our own making.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

A TEST OF POWER.

CHRISTMAS had come and gone, and the season was fairly at its height, when, on a certain January evening of sleet and snow, a party of three or four gentlemen were taking their ease, not exactly at an inn, but at our civilized and latter-day substitute—a well-warmed and well-lighted club-house apartment. Their conversation had been ranging over many topics, social and otherwise, for some time, until at last it chanced to fall upon the most noted among the reigning belles of the season.

"It is rather singular," said one of them —Harry Arle, by name—"that all the time I am dancing and talking with her, I feel a positive conviction that I have seen her somewhere before, and an equally positive incapacity to even imagine where it could have been. The thing torments me—as a recollection playing at hide-and-seek always will—and is the more remarkable since nobody can say that she is a person likely to be forgotten."

"Decidedly not a person likely to be forgotten," said one who occupied the hearth-rug, *à l'Anglaise*. "It is singular, certainly. But then, after all, you may have met her and forgotten it, Hal. Didn't you serve in the trans-Mississippi for a while?"

"To be sure I did, but what has that to do with it? If I had never heard of Valerie Aylmer—and I scarcely heard of anybody else after I entered the Confederacy—I should hardly have been blockhead enough to meet such a woman and forget her."

"But perhaps you might—"

"There's no perhaps about it! I didn't, I tell you!"

"Of course you didn't," said another, laughing. "The thing would be impossible. Don't excite yourself, Hal; for nobody's going to believe it. Even Thornton, cold-blooded as he is, knows it would be impossible."

"I don't know any thing of the kind," retorted he of the hearth-rug. "She is a pretty woman, undoubtedly; but, in those days, men's heads were not running on pretty women; and, as it is, I am sure I should forget her to-morrow, with any thing of importance to drive her from my recollection."

"You! Who ever set you up as a standard to go by?"

"Nobody, I hope; since he might readily find a better one."

"And easily find a worse," said Arle. "Don't abuse yourself, Thornton. It is such bad taste, and so unnecessary, too, as long as one has any friends left. So this is *the* Miss Aylmer," he went on, meditatively; "the same that all those Louisiana fellows used to swear by so tremendously. They called her—deuce take my memory!—what was it they called her, Darford?"

"*La belle des belles*," answered the person addressed. "I remembered the name the first moment I saw her. Strangely enough, too, I remembered Estmann's face when he used to spring to his feet—about half-seas over—crying out, 'Full glasses now

boys; for here's health and long life to *La belle des belles!*' Poor fellow! he was about as far gone in the matter of love as I have ever seen anybody; and now he's there," —the speaker nodded toward the silent Virginia battle-fields—"while she's here."

"In full blast, too," said Arle. "Well —such is life. 'To-day for me, to-morrow for thee,' you know; so by all means spend to-day as royally as you can. That's the philosophy the times have taught me. Estmann was not the only one of her victims, though. There was Chatard of the twenty-ninth—he was killed at Malvern Hill, you know—and Boyd of the Washington Artillery; and—"

"Pshaw!" interrupted Thornton. "If you begin counting over her list of killed and wounded, you will find that half the Louisiana brigades were spoony about her. She was the standing toast at every mess-table to which I ever was invited; and I am sure that at least one-third of the field-pieces were named after her. Do you remember that splendid mare Alston had shot under him at Chancellorsville? I really believe he hated the loss of the creature, principally because she was named *La belle des belles.*"

"Well, can anybody tell me what is the secret of it all?" asked Number Four, whose name was Stuart, and whose *forte* was mild cynicism and skepticism. "She's pretty, of course; though a great deal too dark for my taste—but there are plenty other pretty women in the world, and they don't make such a noise. I should really like to know the secret of it."

"You'd really like to know the origin of evil too, wouldn't you?" asked Arle, laughing. "The questions are equally abstruse, I take it. At least, I have known a great many wise men in my life; but I have never yet known any of them wise enough to tell how it is that one pretty woman goes through the world unnoticed, while another, in no degree prettier, is answerable for the imbecility of dozens."

"I shouldn't think of making her answerable for their imbecility," said Thornton. "In cases of this kind, 'a fool's a fool for a' that,' and it would go hard with women if they were made accountable for all the absurdity that has their name for its warrant."

"That's where we always disagree," said Darford. "I don't know that it's worth while arguing with you; but my opinion remains the same: no man ever made a fool of himself without just provocation and encouragement."

"Take care, then, when you come within range of this fair lady," said Arle. "Report has slandered her terribly if she does not understand this provocation and encouragement better than any other woman of her day and generation."

"Perhaps that is what is the matter with Romney," put in the cynic. "Has anybody noticed a change in him lately?"

"For better, or for worse?"

"Well, not exactly for either. There's a difference; but I should not feel justified in describing it as an improvement."

"Perhaps you mean that crimson sling," suggested Arle. "It is remarkably becoming!"

"Hold your envious tongue!" retorted Thornton. "You haven't forgiven him for that walk in the snow yet.—Don't mind his interruption, Stuart. Explain what you mean."

"I don't know that I can explain," said Stuart, in an injured tone. "Anybody that had eyes might have seen it for himself. He isn't as fretful and ready to take offence of late, but he's twice as supercilious and full of self-conceit."

"He hasn't played any to speak of since he got well," said Arle, "and that's something remarkable."

"Nor flirted any, either," subjoined Darford.

"And from these facts you argue that the pretty Prince Charming is probably netted!"

"Something more than probably, I should say; considering that he is on terms of the most evident intimacy with this fair lady, and, with all his *blasé* affectations, I really think Romney is spoony at bottom."

"Oh, he was completely knocked over some time ago," said Darford, carelessly. "I shouldn't be surprised if he succeeded, too; and, if so, he'll make a good thing of it. Miss Aylmer is her grandfather's sole heiress."

"She's got a brother," said Stuart. "I met him in Paris this fall."

"She's got two of them, for that matter," answered Arle, coolly; "but they are her half-brothers—no relation to M. Vacquant. I have heard on the best possible authority, however, that he means to leave the bulk of his fortune to his nephew."

"My dear fellow, what do you consider the best possible authority?"

"What do you think of Madame Vacquant?"

Darford, who had asked the former question, shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"I don't think any thing at all. I should not trust a statement of hers any further than—I wanted to. She'd say the moon was made of green cheese, if such an assertion would serve her purpose in any way. As for this, it's not like her habitual caution to speak so openly of a family matter; and that in itself would make me suspect something. Ten to one, Miss Aylmer *is* the heiress; and she spreads this report to keep the course clear until her pretty darling has come in at the winning-post."

"You are right," said Thornton, nodding toward the speaker. "I give you credit for your sagacity. It's not many people who see that far into *la madame*. For my part, I hold her to be a woman whose diplomatic power is so great that she is simply wasted in her present position. She should have been born to the throne of all the Russias, where she could have revelled in affairs of state to her heart's content. But I can't help hoping it may be true about Darcy's heirship!—he is such a capital fellow!"

"He is indeed!" said Arle, warmly—"the very best of fellows! But his picture-painting does not look much as if he were a presumptive millionnaire, does it? I wish, by-the-way, he'd settle here. We need a first-rate artist deplorably. Wouldn't Miss Rivière be enchanted if he did? Do you know, I really think there is something serious in that quarter? I wouldn't blame him, either. She's charming in every thing but the one great essential—confound it!—By-the-way, Thornton, you are *au courant* of every thing musical—can you tell me whether she is really meditating a public appearance?"

"Not I," said Thornton. "But, for her own sake, I hope the report is unfounded."

"Why?"

"Simply because she would fail, if she were foolish enough to attempt such a thing."

"I don't see that."

"Don't you? Then I trust you never may—that's all."

"Have you ever heard her sing?"

"Never."

"Then how the deuce—"

"Oh, nonsense, Darford! Don't you know Thornton is wholly incredulous of 'native talent,' and 'native culture,' and all that sort of thing?" interrupted Arle, laughingly. "He puts his trust in Italian singers, and disdains every thing below German fiddles. I only wonder he ever said a good word for anybody born this side of the water."

"I certainly don't put my trust in amateur vocalists, who have had their heads turned by drawing-room applause, and want to carry their weak falsettos on the boards," said Thornton, indifferently. "I have never heard Miss Rivière sing; but I don't know where she would stow away a voice in that childish figure of hers; at all events, she had better think twice before she comes before the public."

"Then there's Romney," said Stuart—not very relevantly, as it seemed. "I've always thought it a pity he would not try the lyric stage. He has a capital tenor, and the profession would suit him. The perpetual incense and flattery might do something toward soothing that chronic discontent of his, if any thing could."

"A proviso well added," said Arle, throwing away the burning end of his cigar "At least if he ever does take such a step, I should be profoundly thankful that Fate did not make a stage-manager of me. Now, *à propos des bottes*, who is opera-bound to-night?"

"All of us, I fancy," said Darford. "Do you mean to say it is time? If so, I must be off, for I have a troublesome couple of

cousins on my hands.—Thornton, do you take anybody?"

Thornton shook his head. He rarely took anybody in the way Darford meant.

"No," he said. "I need to keep my ears open—as I shall have to tell to-morrow how often the tenor sang B natural when he ought to have sung B flat—and if you ever succeeded in doing that with a woman by your side, it is more than I have. No matter whether a cavatina or a duo is going on, the pretty creatures *will* prattle about the basso's eyes and the prima donna's dress! Is it an off-night of escort-duty with either of you two?"

"Not with me," said Stuart, gloomily.

"I half promised Violet to come back," said Arle; "but I doubt if she expects me—the Tracys were to call for her anyway."

"Then you'll come with me," said Thornton, "and, after the opera, we'll adjourn for supper to Guy's."

"Agreed."

Then the quartet broke up.

An hour or two later, when Messieurs Arle and Thornton were shown to their stalls in the parquet of a crowded house, they found the seat adjoining them already occupied by a gentleman who, turning round on their entrance, proved to be Darcy. Salutations were cordially exchanged, and then, while he and Thornton fell into animated conversation, Arle screwed his lorgnette into place, and applied himself to a survey of the scene. It was a very brilliant one; for with the exception of a ballroom, there are few prettier sights than an opera-house—especially in Baltimore. From the dress-circle down to the verge of the orchestra, there was a perfect sweep of light and beauty, of fleecy dresses, and downy opera-cloaks, of waving fans and gleaming jewels, of fair hair elaborately arranged, and fair faces brightly smiling, until the *coup d'œil* was of almost dazzling effect. To one keenly alive to such impressions, it was an overture in itself, this bright gala-picture, this surging, flashing sea of human life pent within these narrow walls at the bidding of a thousand different caprices, and broken into a thousand different waves of thought and feeling that were all soon to be toned to the beating of one great pulse by the rising harmonies of the mighty power of music. Arle recognized a dozen acquaintances, and bestowed at least a dozen bows in half as many minutes, when suddenly his glass stopped short in its transit round the glittering horseshoe, and remained fixed on one of the right-hand proscenium-boxes.

Nor was his the only one thus attracted, for Miss Aylmer had just entered, and taken her seat behind the curtains, drawing them back with one hand, while her glance swept over the house as quietly and indifferently as though from every part of it the ivory-mounted "double-barrels" had not been levelled upon her. There is a great deal in the consciousness of looking well to support a woman under such a scrutiny, however—and Valerie had never looked better. She was not at all one of the people whom the French have in mind when they say, contemptuously, that by artificial light it is impossible to tell a woman from a gnat—but she "lighted up" splendidly. If she was beautiful in ordinary dress, and by broad daylight, she was something positively dazzling in evening costume, and amid evening surroundings. She was now evidently dressed for some after-ball, for, when she loosened and partially threw back the soft mass of cashmere and swan's-down that did duty for a cloak, her shoulders gleamed like polished marble above a corsage of rose-colored silk cut *à la Grecque*, and the shimmer of large pearls encircled her throat. In her masses of raven hair—no chignon or waterfall monstrosity had been called into play—the same beautiful gems gleamed with their soft, fitful light, while her cheeks glowed, her eyes shone, and her whole face was so full of beauty—so like in tint to a fervid tropical blossom—that even the impassive Thornton murmured as he lowered his glass:

"*La belle des belles* indeed! No wonder she does so much mischief—only I should think she would have accomplished her appointed share by this time."

"Look at Romney, if you want to see about that," said Arle, with a laugh. "No doubt of his being hard hit, eh, Darcy?"

"*L'amour et la fumée ne peuvant se cacher*," answered Darcy, turning one careless glance on the handsome face and silken sling that appeared just behind Valerie's white shoulder. Then the overture clashed forth, and there was silence with the trio.

Not so, however, in the box which, beside Miss Aylmer and her cavalier, held Madame Vacquant and a certain *ami de la maison*—Harvey Wilmer by name—who was the most convenient person imaginable for hack-duty, being always ready to play escort at a moment's notice, and never offended or disquieted at being dropped with any amount of summary haste. When the overture began, he had just discovered Maurice Darcy's presence in the house, and announced the fact to his companion.

She nodded, with a smile.

"He has been in Richmond for a day or two," she said, "and I quite forgot his intended return when I asked you to accompany us. Of course, after that, I had no seat to offer him. He promised to look in during the evening, however. Is not some one entering the opposite box? I will trouble you for my glasses."

The glasses were surrendered and fixed just in time to catch the timid grace with which a dainty, brown-eyed girl entered the box in question, and, without throwing off her wrappings, at once sank out of sight behind the curtains, while a pale, elegant woman advanced to the front with a high-bred composure which was very perfect. They were quite alone, and Madame Vacquant lowered her lorgnette with something of a shrug.

"Mrs. Rivière and Alix," she said. "They make a point of being present at every thing musical, I believe—and rarely accept an escort. There must be some foundation for the rumor that— Ah! the curtain is going up!"

The opera was "Faust;" and since this was among its earliest representations in Baltimore, quite a hush reigned over the house during the act which ensued. The Marguerite of the occasion was one who, since then, has almost made the *rôle* her own—playing it with unbounded applause before the most critical audiences of the Old World; but, though she has gained power and culture, none who see her to-day will say that she has gained grace and expression since she charmed us in those early days, when she came shyly moving across the stage in her peasant kirtle, with her downcast eyes, and a missal closely clasped in her slender hands. When the act ended, there was a surging movement all over the house, as of some anxiety safely passed; then, while the tribute of enthusiasm was still echoing, Darcy and Arle rose with one accord from their seats.

"Of course," said Thornton, "you do well to be in haste—if you want even so much as a smile—for there are plenty more moving in the same direction. I take it for granted you are both going there?"

He nodded toward the box where Valerie was already holding court; but Darcy shook his head.

"Arle may speak for himself," he said; "but I am bound for quite another part. How is it, Hal? You *are* going there? Well, *au revoir*, then!"

He moved away, and a few minutes later opened the door of the box that contained Mrs. Rivière and her daughter. Both ladies turned round on his entrance, and both of their faces brightened so cordially that it was easy to see what a welcome visitor he was. A familiar visitor, too, their greetings proved; and the sweet face of the girl looked pleased and happy as that of a child, when he sat down by her, and asked how she liked the prima donna. Her raptures made him smile a little; but he listened to them, with that indulgent air which plainly shows that even nonsense from the lips of the speaker would be pleasant; and, as he listened, he also—looked.

Artist as he was, he had certainly rarely seen a prettier sight at which to look. Nobody had ever called Alix Rivière beautiful, and probably nobody ever would do so, since in the popular estimation there are certain elements of brilliance needed to make a type of even moderate beauty; and brilliant Alix never was. Indeed, every tint of her face, and every line of her figure, was so subdued and harmonious, that, unless attention were called to the fact, people

rarely noticed how exquisitely delicate was the one, how perfect in symmetry was the other. They said she was "lovely" and "charming," and a dozen other things besides, and they knew that she was as graceful and fresh as a wild-flower of her native woods; but they never opened their eyes to see what a refined and dainty beauty she really possessed. Darcy saw it to-night, however—saw the fitful blushes coming and going under the transparent skin, saw the sweet curl of the flexile lips, the clear, classical outline of feature and head, the coronal of brown curls, silken as the plumage of a bird, and waving all around the fair, open, childlike brow—a brow in form and shape like Mozart's—and, above all, the large brown eyes, full of soft gloom, and deeply set under the arched brows. Once only he glanced away from her—glanced across the house, to the vivid face just opposite—and then back again. It was, after this, that he said:

"What is the reason you have been ambuscading in this dark corner all the evening? I watched for even so much as a glimpse of you—but I watched vainly. There are not so many fair faces here to-night that we can afford to dispense with one of the fairest."

She looked up at him with very genuine rebuke in her eyes.

"That does not sound like you," she said. "I don't fancy compliments from my friends. To tell the truth, I have kept in the background because I wanted to listen to the music without being interrupted by visitors. You need not raise your eyebrows. You know I don't mean you. But if I had come forward, I should not have been afraid of much observation—with Miss Aylmer just opposite. Is she not looking brilliantly?"

"Very," he answered, quietly; "but I did not know that you especially admired her."

"I! Oh, indeed yes. It is a matter of obligation with every Louisianian to admire *La belle des belles*, you know. I think she is the most beautiful—the very most beautiful woman I ever saw. What a grace and charm there is in her every movement! Look, Captain Darcy—look at that attitude!"

With a smile, he took the lorgnette she eagerly extended, and raised it to his eyes—looked for a moment, then lowered it again.

"It is a very perfect picture," he said, coolly. "Only, don't you think it is a pity that one feels sure it has been so well studied?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, a little wonderingly.

"I mean," he answered, carelessly, "Miss Aylmer remembers exactly how many lorgnettes are levelled on her, and knows to a shade how far to advance her hand or arrange her drapery—not to speak of those smiles and glances which are as plainly stage-effects as the prima donna's flaxen tresses."

Alix looked up—all indignant reproach—but the curtain rose at the moment, and Darcy was spared the task of justifying his aspersions. She turned at once to the stage, and for the time being had neither eyes nor ears for any thing else. Her absorption was so complete, that she was entirely unconscious of the interest with which Maurice watched her; or that he smiled at her eagerness as she leaned forward, drinking in every note of the plaintive and beautiful "King of Thule." She looked up at him when the air was finished, and their eyes met with that fulness of common sympathy which some of us know, or think we know, once or twice in life—but never oftener. "Oh, was it not exquisite?" sighed the little enthusiast, out of the very depths of her music-loving heart. Then her gaze travelled back to the stage, and soon she was bound in a spell of rapture by the brilliant and difficult strain of the "Air des Bijoux." It was here that Darcy began to share her absorption—that the great prima donna extended the spell of her power over him too. Of course he did not throw himself body and soul into the tide of harmonies, as the trembling, quivering, impressionable nature beside him was doing; but he forgot other surroundings for a space, and was swayed by the pathos and power of the scene before him. Ah, that matchless music of Gounod!

Most of us have heard it again and again, and yet we learn a deeper lesson each time that we do hear it, and we go away as if we could never, never learn all its subtle meanings and hidden beauties—but will any of us ever forget the hour when we heard it first, when through and through us the mighty pulse of the master's genius rushed till earth seemed fading away beneath our feet, and the hot, sharp pleasure was more intense than, and almost as bitter as, pain? In the famous "garden-scene," the prima donna's *abandon* of passion, her intensely dramatic powers of acting, her marvellous voice, which momently developed new fulness and compass, held her audience enchained as one man. As one man, that vast, silent crowd hushed its breath—struggled with her—thrilled with her—trembled with her—sank with her into the depths of woman's loving weakness! When at last the curtain fell, it was not strange that, from gallery to pit, the applause broke forth in one wild storm, rising and falling only to rise again, when a fair, smiling girl, who had nothing in common with poor, impassioned Marguerite, made her appearance before the curtain, bowing her graceful thanks to right and left.

Then Alix turned round in a perfect fever of enthusiasm.

"Is she not charming? Is she not glorious? Ah, who would not be a great cantatrice?" was her cry.

"Would you be a great cantatrice in opera?" asked Darcy, a little significantly.

She hesitated a moment—then looked up at her mother and smiled. "Well—no, not in opera, I believe. I had forgotten the acting, and was thinking only of the singing. That is so beautiful! I wonder—I wonder—" Her voice broke down here, but her companion seemed to understand what she meant.

"Don't wonder any thing about it," said he, kindly. "Remember that confidence in your own power is sometimes half the battle. The day is not far distant when you will be as well or better known to fame than the singer you have heard to-night."

"You are very good to say so, but—"

"But what?"

"I cannot think so; and indeed I do not care much for it to be so. I love Music so well that I would gladly serve her as bondwoman all my life, without any other recompense than she herself gives. But since that is impossible, since I *must* hope for a little reward, I hope for it in the shape of money, not of fame."

"Hush, Alix!" said her mother, laughing. "You shock Captain Darcy by such mercenary avowals."

"Captain Darcy does not look shocked," said Alix, glancing at him shyly. "I am not afraid to talk so before him—he understands me."

"Yes, I think I do," said Darcy, quickly, and in his heart he truly did. He understood how this sensitive nature shrank from the fierce glare of that publicity which we call fame, and how still more deeply it recoiled from making merchandise of the service which was to her—as it is to every true child of music—only a degree less holy than the service of God. In her soul there was music always, her whole life was set to the half-unconscious rhythm of noble harmonies, and there was not a thought or an act of it apart from this great worship; but still, she faced bravely and steadily the necessity of taking these heaven-born powers and inspirations into the rude market of the world. It was out of the very depths of her devotion that she said those words which disgust us so often in their sordid application—"I desire money, not fame."

"I have a favor to ask of you," Darcy said, after a moment's pause. "You dine at my aunt's to-morrow evening, don't you? Yes—I thought so. Well, I want you to sing for Thornton!"

Alix drew back and looked at him—a good deal surprised, and a little aghast.

"For Mr. Thornton—the great musical critic! Oh, Captain Darcy, I would do any thing—almost any thing you asked me. But I cannot do that!"

"Why not? He is no lion going about to devour unwary singers."

"Isn't he? Well, I really thought he was, and you must admit that such is his character. No, no. I cannot think of it. I am sure I should disgrace myself if I ever tried—"

She broke off here, for the box-door opened at that moment, and two gentlemen entered. They were not Baltimoreans, but Louisianians, who, chancing to be in the house, had recognized Mrs. Rivière and her daughter, and came up to renew an old acquaintance. So, rendered quite *de trop* by the cordial greetings and inquiries which immediately took place, Darcy surrendered his seat to one of them, and went back to Thornton.

Meanwhile, matters were not progressing as smoothly as might have been desirable in that box where, for the time being, Miss Aylmer had established her court. There was, indeed, very serious revolt on hand, though no one would have suspected as much from the fair sovereign's cloudless brow, and only a close observer could have detected an occasional glance stealing now and then toward the dark corner where, moody and jealous, Romney had retired to chew the cud of injured meditation. His grievances had begun early in the evening—begun with some trifling cause of offence even before they left home—and every successive hour had swollen them into greater magnitude. For some time, he held his ground steadily at the back of Valerie's chair; but she had never been in brighter spirits, and so many thronged around her, that he found even a whisper in her ear the next thing to impossible. Almost any other man would have had sense enough to perceive that, for once, she preferred word-play with a dozen to sentiment with one, and, perceiving this, have been reasonably content to bide his time. But Julian was never reasonable, nor ever content to see attention, that should have been given to him, monopolized by one other or twenty others. His offended jealousy waxed apace with every fresh offering of incense, and every gracious smile which rewarded each, until at last the cup of his indignation overflowed, and, heedless of his mother's remonstrant glances, he pushed back his chair like an angry school-boy, and retired into a corner to sulk. There he sat, dark and lowering, while Arlie took possession of the vacant seat, and listened eagerly while Valerie told him how she had once nursed him through a fever in one of the hospitals of Shreveport. When she finished, the young man looked up at her with a grateful light shining in his frank eyes.

"So that is why your face has always seemed so strangely familiar to me," he said—"more like some fragment of a dream than any thing else? I remember it all now! I remember that, when I got well, and thanked Sister Theresa for my life, she told me that it was not to her I owed it, but to some lady who had nursed me night and day until I was out of danger. I little thought I should ever find that lady—in the toast of every Louisiana soldier."

"Yes," said Valerie, with a blush and a smile. "The hospitals were so crowded, that the sisters could not do all the nursing, and several of us volunteered our aid. Yours was the worst case in my ward—I shall never forget how you raved!—and so, of course, I knew you again as soon as I saw you. I was only very sorry that I had to leave town before you were entirely recovered—but papa was transferred to another command, and the doctor assured me you were out of danger."

"I am glad he was right," said the young man earnestly. "I am glad that I am alive to thank you for your kindness, and am still more glad to hope that I may some day find means of repaying it—at least in part. Will you remember that you have one sworn defender and champion, if ever you should need either defender or champion?"

"Yes, I will remember," she said. "But pray don't talk of thanks and repayment, or else you will force me to tell you that what I did for you I would have done for any other soldier—and did do for many others."

"And do you think that lessens the obligation?" he asked. "I should rather think that it increased it. In one sense, at least, we are more grateful to strangers than to friends for care or aid. I won't trouble you with thanks if you do not like them, however. I shall only hold Fortune my debtor until she gives me one good chance to render you service."

Valerie smiled. She liked the gallant young Marylander who had given up so much, and suffered so much, for the cause

she loved; and for whom her heart had bled when he lay tossing in burning delirium thousands of miles from his home; but these words had a very unreal sound to her ear—as indeed such words will have in the midst of surroundings like hers. It was hardly likely that it would ever be in the power of this stranger to do her service; but still she thanked him as she well knew how to thank, adding half sadly: "We only did our duty—we women—but it was a duty that was its own best reward. I am sure there is not one of us who, if we could, would take back the sacrifices, or forget the privations, of those years of glory and suffering. I don't mean to talk hackneyed sentiment; but there is nothing more true than that life has never given us, never can give us, a greater pleasure than the pleasure of serving the men who were fighting for us. But this is serious talk for an opera, is it not?—and see! here is the chapel-scene, to be in keeping."

She turned her face toward the stage, and her companion had discretion enough to be silent, while the mild, sad refrain wailed from the orchestra like the cry of a lost spirit, as the long procession swept slowly into the church, leaving Marguerite prone among the desolate tombs. It must be a soul inseparably wedded to levity, a heart wholly given over to frivolity, which this weird, haunting dirge does not move to its utmost depths—does not stir and shake in every chord, by the hopeless desolation too deep even for the agony which breathes in its unutterable mournfulness. Just now, it touched Valerie like the voice of her own bereavement. Arle's words—indeed, his very presence—had brought back, ah! so vividly, the bitter pain, the sweeping desolation, which is all that the name of "country" can give to any of her race; and, as she leaned back behind the curtains, sheltered by their shade, and the gloom hanging over all things, burning tears rose into her eyes, and there seemed an answering pang of her heart for every wail of the dying melody. We talk of the fitness of things; but perhaps there is nothing so striking in life as their very unfitness—as the fact that, whenever some great emotion seizes us, as it were, despite our will, it does not choose what we would consider a fitting time or place, but overpowers us amid surroundings that add to its force by their very elements of discordance!

After a while, when Valerie looked round, she found, to her surprise, that Darcy had entered the box, and was standing behind Madame Vacquant. She felt a little piqued, for she thought he might have come earlier, or not come at all; but she was about to summon him with a motion of her hand to the chair which Arle had by this time vacated, when Romney suddenly came back and took possession of it. It would have been well if he had cleared his face before doing so, or at least modulated his voice to some proper tone; but, on the contrary, he looked as lowering as ever, and spoke abruptly—almost rudely.

"I thought that fellow was never going! Can I at last have a little of your attention?"

Valerie's brows contracted. Insolence and familiarity were two things for which she had ever possessed little tolerance and less patience.

"My attention has been at the service of whoever chose to claim it, all the evening," she said, coldly. "If you—"

"Yes," he interrupted, bitterly; "if I had felt inclined to take a nod now and then between the words and smiles you gave to others, I might no doubt have had it; but you ought to know, by this time, that I cannot do that—I will not do it! If I cannot obtain what I desire—what you gave me a day or two ago—I prefer to take nothing."

"I am afraid you will have to content yourself with nothing, then," she said, coolly. "As for what I gave you a day or two ago, that was nothing, that I am aware of, besides friendliness and courtesy. They are still at your command, unless you choose to throw them away of your own accord. In that case, I beg that I may not be held accountable."

Perhaps General Aylmer was right—perhaps she was already growing tired of her pretty toy. At least, she would not have spoken thus a week ago, and he felt

it. He grew very pale, and bit his lip almost savagely, as he answered:

"Of course. It is only I who can be accountable for any thing—not you. It is a fine farce that we have been playing, but if it turns into a tragedy, who is to blame? Tones and smiles are impalpable things, and, however well they do their work, cannot be brought forward as witnesses. Only—you might keep that tone for those who have never known them."

Before he finished, he saw that he was losing all he would have risked so much to gain; but the spirit which urged him on made him reckless of consequences, until the last words were spoken. Then he would have given any thing to have recalled them; but it was too late. Whoever doubted whether Miss Aylmer could be haughty, should have seen her as she answered:

"That is quite enough, I think. You surely cannot be yourself, or you would know that such a tone as this is the last that I can tolerate from any one. You must excuse me if I dispense with your attendance for the remainder of the evening; and you may take this comfort with you: the tones and smiles of which you speak shall trouble you no more."

He was about to answer, but she turned from him, and so—the angry devil uppermost for the time—he rose and left the box. Then, after a moment, Valerie leaned forward and touched Maurice Darcy, who had striven *not* to hear the brief *tête-à-tête* just concluded. When he turned, she pointed to the vacant chair.

"Sit down, please," she said; "I have something to say to you; and I confess I like to talk on a level. Now—that is better. To begin, then, did I hear you tell Madame Vacquant that you were not going to Mrs. More's to-night?"

"Yes," he answered; "I told her that it was probable I should not be there. I am not fond of crush balls, and I promised Thornton to join a supper-party at Guy's."

"Would Mr. Thornton care very much if you broke your promise?"

"Probably not; but why do you ask?"

"For a singular reason, I suppose you will think," she said, with a laugh. "I have taken a fancy to recall you to a sense of duty. Mrs. More, and especially Miss Nellie, will think very hardly of your treating them in this way. You ought to go to the ball—you must go!"

"You speak like a born empress," he said, smiling. "But I cannot admit the force of your reasoning. Mrs. More and Miss Nellie will not miss one face from their five hundred friends."

"Suppose I say that I will miss it, then? Will you refuse to please me, too?"

If she meant to test her power, or discover whether she possessed any, she must have been greatly disappointed at the tone in which Darcy answered:

"I regret to be obliged to do so. But an engagement, in my eyes, is always binding; and then I am sure you can be only jesting when you affect any interest in whether I go or stay."

"You are mistaken," she retorted. "I never trouble myself to affect interest in any thing. Just now, I have a genuine fancy to change your resolution. Can I not tempt you by the first waltz?"

"If I could be tempted, I would not need such an inducement."

She looked at him steadily, and saw that he meant what he said; saw, also, that this was evidently different material from that which she was accustomed to bend to her will; and so, with a rather equivocal smile, gave up the point.

"I have always heard that Irishmen were proverbial for gallantry; and I confess I am not used to finding engagements stand in *my* way," she said. "You have disabused me of two erroneous impressions, Captain Darcy, so I suppose I ought to thank you. Is the house absolutely emptying? Well, at least, I hope you will relieve Mr. Wilmer of double duty by seeing me to the carriage?"

What Darcy's reply was, it is not hard to conjecture; but, for all that, *La belle des belles* went to the ball alone, and he joined the supper at Guy's.

CHAPTER II.

OVERTURES OF PEACE.

It was a very pale face, and very heavy, bloodshot eyes, that Romney brought down to the breakfast-room the next morning, when he sauntered in so late that every one had long since departed, and only his mother was left to bear him company. Perhaps he had not expected or desired to see her, for he frowned at meeting her glance, and flung himself, without speaking, into a chair. He did not even thank her for the cup of coffee which she extended toward him, but took it silently, with a somewhat tremulous hand, and then pointed to the sideboard. The servant in attendance evidently understood what was meant, for he brought forward a small decanter of French brandy, from which Julian poured a liberal "sharpener" into his cup. Then, meeting his mother's eye, he muttered half apologetically:

"It is the best thing in the world to steady one's nerves."

Madame Vacquant made a motion dismissing the servant before she answered, with cold reproach:

"Nerves don't need steadying that have not been racked overnight by dissipation."

"Not by drink, at least," he retorted, angrily. "I drank not a drop more than just enough to keep me up."

"Up to what?"

He raised his eyes half-defiantly, and perhaps something in the hardness of her tone may have provoked the reckless disdain of his.

"Up to play, if you must know."

With all her self-control, Madame Vacquant could not prevent a slight change of color, nor a slight gasp of the breath, as she said, bitterly:

"And this is your promise?"

"My promise was a very indefinite one," he answered, coolly. "I hope you did not understand it as a total abstinence pledge."

"No; I only understood this—that, if you played in future, it must be with the certainty of having to pay your own debts."

"You mean that you will advance nothing more?"

"I mean that, emphatically."

He drained his cup, and pushed it back violently. "Then I might as well buy a dose of prussic acid," he said, bitterly. "One thing is certain, I will not endure the disgrace of shirking debts of honor, and I have not the means to pay one-third of the sum I lost last night."

"How much was it?"

He named the amount—a large one indeed—but his mother did not start. She only said, icily, "You should have thought of your ability for payment before staking so much."

He looked at her steadily, but there was no change at all in her face, and at length he muttered, sullenly: "I see I should have thought of it. But now there is nothing left save to pay what I have lost. If you won't help me—of course you can if you choose—I shall only have to borrow the money on usury, and then—leave here! If I once do that, Baltimore is not likely to see me again soon."

"We can dispense with threats," she said, coolly. "You might know, by this time, that they have very little effect on me. Perhaps I am not heroically inclined, but I am not at all afraid of your committing suicide, or going away to starve. We had better come back to the point, and let me correct one statement in your last speech. You say there is no doubt of my being able to help you if I choose: you are mistaken. I *don't* choose, but if I did, I should find it hard to do so. You exhausted my private resources when you made your last demand. If I helped you again, I would have to call on M. Vacquant."

He looked up eagerly; cold as her tone was, he seemed to find some assurance of hope in it. "What is more easy than that?" he inquired.

"It is like a man's selfishness to ask," his mother answered, with something between scorn and indignation in her voice. "Very easy and very natural to you, I grant, that I should lie and dissimulate, for the sake of your vices—but not so easy or so natural to me! Does it never strike you

that, in applying to M. Vacquant, I have to assign some pretext for the demand?"

"I should think you would only need to choose among a dozen pretexts. He must be a strange millionnaire if he grudges his wife a few thousands for pin-money."

"He does not grudge it—he is liberal to a fault. But he is not easily blinded. He would not hesitate a moment to give me any reasonable amount for which I asked; but he would suspect at once for what purpose I wanted it."

"Well—let him!"

"Let him! You say that, when you know that he does not like you now?"

"Yes, I know," Romney answered, with a sneer. "But what then? His like or dislike does not matter to me, so long as he does not order me from his house, or forbid me the use of his cellar. As for any hopes of heirship, I should think you would have seen, long ago, that they were mere moonshine."

"I see that you have only yourself to thank for their failure. Do you think he would have cared to take up this adventurer, if you had not disappointed him?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "You flatter yourself. So far from disappointing him, he never even thought of me. As for the adventurer—I suppose you mean Darcy—he seems to suit him, and I am sure it is all a question of taste. He is not likely to suit anybody else."

"I am not sure about that. I begin to think, of late, that he may suit somebody else."

Her tone was so significant that Julian started quickly. "Whom do you mean?" he asked, curtly."

She answered, briefly, 'I mean Valerie."

"You think that this—this painter is likely to please her?"

"Yes, I think so."

"May—" The curse was none the less bitter because something of conventional courtesy made the speaker finish it beneath his breath. Perhaps his mother did not hear him; at all events she only said quietly, after a moment:

"The only hope is, that he may not care to take advantage of her caprice."

"Then there is no hope at all," the other retorted. "Better men would give half their lives for such a chance."

"Better men, perhaps, but certainly not wiser ones," she answered, coldly. "No woman is worth half a man's life; and a coquette like Valerie Aylmer is not worth one day of it. Maurice may not see that her nets are thrown in his direction just now, but, if he does, he at least has sense enough to decline giving her vanity another triumph."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this—" and she repeated to him the scene that had followed his departure the night before. "Now," she said, in conclusion, "you see what was the result of your folly and obstinacy. If Maurice had not played into your hand, you would only have thrown up the game to him. When will you learn that moody looks and angry words have lost many a cause, but never yet gained one—especially with a woman? If you were engaged to Valerie a dozen times over, you could not act with impunity, as you acted last night. And in a man whose chances hang on a thread, it was simple madness. I shall not be surprised if you have ruined yourself irreparably."

She paused, but he sat sullenly silent—making no effort toward answer or self-justification; and after a moment she resumed:

"You surely forget how much hangs on this, or you would never have been betrayed into such folly. You surely forget that, if you do not succeed here, your last chance of the fortune is gone. It is a matter of life and death with you to make a claim on M. Vacquant by marrying his granddaughter."

He flung himself back in his chair with a sort of fierce impatience.

"It is likely to be death, then."

"Yes," she said, contemptuously, "if you choose to surrender the field—and I never saw a fairer one—without a blow."

"You say that, because you don't know how little she means, or has meant any thing beyond this foolery of flirtation."

"There you are mistaken. I know ex

actly what she means—and I also know what, if you were wise, you would mean. She means amusement—you would mean earnest. If you only knew how to play your cards even tolerably, I see the end so clear."

He looked up eagerly. "Show it to me then! Show me any certainty of gaining her, and you will never need to find fault with my vacillation again?"

"The first thing is to go and make your peace for last night's conduct. Bring matters back to the footing of a day or two ago, and that will be one step gained. But you must keep your temper under control in future. You will find her in the sitting-room."

The last words were spoken in somewhat of a tone of surprise, for Julian did not stir. On the contrary, he sat still—a picture of resentful obstinacy.

"That is all very fine, but, before I play puppet in the dark, I must have some assurance about that money. It must be forthcoming—by some means or other. Do you mean to get it for me, or shall I go to the usurers?"

"If I do get it for you, you must remember that it is for the last time."

"Yes—of course."

"And that I will receive no more 'indefinite' promises in exchange."

"I will give my bond not to touch cards or dice again until I can stake some of my affectionate step-father's thousands on them—will that do?"

"We will talk of conditions when the money is ready," she said, rising. "Now will you go to Valerie, or will you wait until some visitor comes in, and the opportunity is lost?"

He answered by shrugging his shoulders and leaving the room.

A few moments later, Valerie, who was seated at the piano, playing strains and snatches from "Faust," heard the door behind her softly open, and looking up into a large mirror against the wall, saw Romney's face as he entered the room. It was a good thing that he had paused outside to banish all trace of its late expression from it, and summon up a languor which rather became the pallid complexion and purple-ringed eyes, for he had not counted on such a speedy observation as this, and Valerie, in her turn, was less inclined to suspect the genuineness of what she saw. His appearance, indeed, struck her so forcibly, that involuntarily her hands fell from the keys, and she turned round as he advanced.

"You look shockingly!" she said, before he could speak. "What is the matter?"

Romney was not at all lacking in natural readiness, or slow to take any advantage offered him. He saw his opportunity in a moment, and followed it up with commendable quickness. "I may well look shockingly," he said, "if repentance can write itself on the face. I have endured more than I can say since last night, and have had only one thought—how I can ask you to pardon me."

"That is not hard, if you can say that you did not mean—"

Here he interrupted her quickly: "Mean! Ah, how can you think that I meant anything excepting that I was half beside myself? I scarcely know what I said; but I am sure it must have been very dreadful, or you would not have punished it so severely. I would not sentence my worst enemy to such a night and such a morning as you have given me."

"As for the morning, perhaps that has been your own fault," she said, smiling. "You could certainly have shortened it by several hours, if you had chosen. But the night—well, we won't question whose fault that was. Mine, perhaps, in a measure—for I have remembered since that I was neither so patient nor so considerate as I might have been. If you are penitent—and I think you look so—we will cry quits, and be friends again."

Was not this better than he had a right to expect? Romney evidently thought so, for his thanks were poured out warm and fast, together with his justifications. It was in the midst of these last that Valerie stopped him.

"One moment, if you please. Your claim to be angry last night was founded on something about which I don't care to ar-

gue; but, in resuming amicable relations, we must understand one another. I have said that we are friends. You know what that means—and you also know that friends are not jealous of each other."

"No," he answered, with a good deal of creditable self-control; "and, perhaps, that is one reason why I never had much fancy for friendship. But it seems I am to learn it. Do you know how hard a task you set me?—or do you care?"

"I don't know why it should be a hard task," she retorted. "If you think so, however, I had better declare us strangers—or, if you like it better, enemies."

"You are jesting, while I am in earnest," he said, gravely. "I am not your friend—in the sense you mean—or ever likely to be. But I would do any thing in the world to please you; and I can play at this, if you desire it. Only don't be angry if I sometimes forget my *rôle*, and speak as I feel."

"I shall be angry, however—especially if you speak as you did last night."

"Don't mention last night. It is like a nightmare to me. I was half mad when I went away from you, and can you imagine what I did?"

Perhaps not quite truthfully, she shook her head.

"I went straight to the hazard-table," he said, "to try and forget every thing in the excitement of play. But I could not succeed. I was thinking all the time of you, and wondering what you were doing. I lost one game, I remember, trying to imagine who was enjoying *my* waltz."

Valerie blushed deeply. She remembered how vainly she had offered that waltz to Maurice Darcy.

"I will tell you who enjoyed it," she said, "and then you wil. see that your anxiety was lost as well as your game. It fell to George More, quite the stupidest man in Baltimore. Now I hope you are as much ashamed of yourself as you ought to be. By-the-by, do you know that I feel nearly as badly as you look? Dissipation don't seem to agree with us. I wonder if a canter would—do you think the day is too cold? No? I am so glad to hear it. Then pray order the horses, while I go and put on my habit."

He obeyed—only too well pleased to do so—while Madame Vacquant's brow smoothed, as, sitting alone in her own room, she heard Valerie's clear voice lilting the "Flower-Song" on her way up-stairs, and knew thereby that the overtures of peace had been successful. When she heard the same light step descending, however, she opened her door to give a warning.

"Are you going to ride, Valerie? Pray don't over-exert yourself, so that you will be tired and dull to-night. You know we are martyrs to a regular dinner-party, and I look to you for assistance in making it agreeable."

"As if you needed any assistance!" Valerie laughed; "or as if your dinner-parties were not the only endurable ones I ever knew. Don't be afraid of my over-exerting myself, however. Nothing, will do me so much good as a canter—indeed it is my only hope of being able to enjoy Mr. Lawton's good things at all."

She nodded gayly, and glided past. The next moment she was mounted, and cantering over the paving-stones of Charles Street Avenue, much to the astonishment of the lookers-on, who, in their Northern ignorance, associated equestrianism only with soft air and bright skies, and could not conceive that she inhaled with positive zest the damp salt breeze, which brought her hair out of curl, put a glorious color into her cheek, as she shook the reins on her horse's neck, and looked at Julian with a smile.

"Is not this enough to make us forget all the disagreeables of last night?" she asked.

And truly few men would have failed to give the cordial affirmative which was his reply.

Descending the staircase that evening about twenty minutes before dinner, Valerie suddenly met Darcy. It was the first time they had seen each other since the night before; and the remembrance of that fact made the bow with which she was passing him rather cold and stately; when, to her surprise, he paused—thus barring her way, and forcing her to do likewise.

"Excuse me," he said, with a glance at her dress. "I see you are all ready for the drawing-room, but perhaps you won't mind being detained a moment to hear some news which may interest you. It is no longer a matter of doubt about Miss Rivière's appearance in public. She makes her *début* in three weeks."

"Her *début!*" repeated Valerie, startled out of her reserve, by this intelligence, which did interest her very much. "Why, this is news indeed! I had very little idea that her courage would ever be equal to the decisive step. You are sure of it?"

"Perfectly sure," he answered. "She was kind enough to ask my advice on the subject, and I gave it unhesitatingly in favor of an immediate plunge. Craning over a venture is the best thing in the world for sapping away the courage drop by drop—but not for any thing else that I know of."

"But—I don't understand. Is she to appear in opera?"

"No. Her parents would never consent to that, I am sure. She is to appear, but I forget that I was charged not to anticipate her. She wants the pleasure of giving you the particulars herself."

"But you can tell me—"

"Nothing whatever, I am sorry to say," he interrupted, with a smile and a glance at his watch. "I am bound over to secrecy; and I see that I have barely fifteen minutes in which to make my toilet. I am sure you are glad I cannot detain you longer. Only one word—may I trust to your influence in inducing her to sing for Thornton to-night?"

"I will try, but—is that necessary?"

"It is very necessary, since he represents all the good musical element of the city."

"But he is very incredulous of Alix's powers."

"So much the more triumph in converting him, as I mean to do—if you promise your assistance."

"Of course, it is entirely at your service."

"Then I am sure of success," he said, with a laugh; and the next moment they parted.

When Valerie entered the drawing room, she found it well filled—almost the due proportion of guests having arrived, and that appalling solemnity which precedes the announcement of dinner being already heavy in the air. The conversational murmur which filled the saloon had none of that regular, unbroken sweep that characterizes it when the full tide of evening has set in, but was low and fitful; broken by intervals of almost entire silence, that were only bridged over by Madame Vacquant's tones, as she glided from guest to guest, uttering to each the same form of compliment or inquiry, slightly varied to suit the different individual. There were groups of middle-aged gentlemen who chiefly affected the hearth-rug, and talked a little politics among themselves, as they regarded the light ivory-and-gold car of Aurora over the mantel, on whose side the tiny hands were moving fast to the magical stroke of eight. There were elderly ladies, magnificent in heavy velvets and stately moires, enthroned upon sofas and in the depths of dormeuses, exchanging spasmodic confidences about schools and committee-work. There were young ladies scattered like gay birds of tropic plumage in the various nooks and corners of the room, making many picture-like effects with their gleaming dresses and golden hair. There was a brace of English officers, who surveyed the company superciliously from over the collars of morning-coats, and talked principally to one another. There was enough of the literary and artistic element to relieve the insipidity of a purely fashionable *réunion*—and there was the usual amount of *jeune gens* of whom it is the highest compliment to say that they were, as a whole, sufficiently unexceptionable to escape notice. Finally, there was Alix Rivière who, nestling under the wing of a severe-looking chaperon—her mother rarely attended any evening entertainment—gave an exclamation of pleasure when she saw Miss Aylmer, and toward whom the latter at once made her way.

Before they had time for more than a cordial greeting, however, dinner was announced, and all the stir and rustle of exit began. "We will bide our time, *petite*,"

Valerie whispered, as she found herself claimed by that same Mr. Lawton, for the appreciation of whose good things she had declared a canter necessary; then, while she still hesitated to see who would be sent by Madame Vacquant to the service of Alix, Darcy made his opportune appearance, and they wheeled into line.

To more than one person the long ceremony which followed proved infinitely wearying, certainly to Julian, who had been consigned to the tender mercies of a very lively young lady who was "devoted" to every thing, from religion to skating, and possessed an opinion ready-made and very glib of utterance on every subject under heaven; certainly to Valerie, even despite Mr. Lawton's genuine wit and fresh conversational power; certainly to Mr. Thornton, who had fallen into the hands of a female Philistine who conceived that she was doing exactly the right thing in talking musical "shop" (of a very questionable quality) in unlimited quantity; perhaps even to Darcy and Alix, although they seemed very well entertained by one another; but the end came at last—as, if we are only patient, the end of every thing must —and Madame Vacquant gave the signal for the departure of the ladies. Once more there was the soft rustle of silk and velvet, as they filed out in glittering array, leaving the gentlemen to close, with a sigh of relief, round the mahogany, and do that justice to good olives and better wine which feminine presence had before restrained.

Nobody was more glad of this release than Valerie. Not that she was fond of the unlimited gossip which always ensued, of hearing why Sarah Randolph persisted in marrying that dissipated young Carroll; of how Mr. Wilson, who compromised with his creditors for fifty cents in the dollar, last winter, could afford to give such entertainments this season; of whether Mrs. Kerr's *point d'Alençon* cost the price she professes to have given for it in Paris; and if it is likely "the bishop" will allow Rev. Mr. Ray, of the straitest sect of the ritualists, to burn candles on his communion-table—but simply because she was anxious to learn from Alix Rivière's own lips the particulars of her intended *début*. Avoiding, therefore, the group which surrounded Madame Vacquant, and the still less interesting knot at the piano—where some enterprising musician with a very brilliant left hand began to sacrifice over again that oft-murdered "Home" of Thalberg's—she beckoned to Alix, and led the way to the conservatory.

They found it still uninvaded, serenely quiet, and beautiful as ever. The soft plash of the fountain was the only audible sound, the moonlight lustre fell as mellowly down through the giant ferns as when Valerie had first stood there, and the rich tropical fragrance was heavy on the air. It was with a very deep sigh of relief that Alix sank into one of the seats that bordered the marble basin, where the gold-fishes darted and played, and the water rose and sank with such melodious cadence.

"How charming it is!" she said, "and so beautiful! I don't wonder that people say that this conservatory has seen more flirtations and heard more declarations than any other in Baltimore! I am sure that, if I were one of your captives, I could not refrain from love-making, Valerie—especially in this bewitching light."

"You will allow me to be glad, then, that you are not," Valerie answered. "There are a great many things more agreeable than love-making—especially when the interest is all on one side. And just at present I am only interested in an item of news which Captain Darcy gave me before dinner. Can you possibly imagine what it was?"

Alix looked up with a world of innocence in her eyes.

"How should I, dear? I am the last person in the world to be clever at divining."

"Keep your powers of acting for the stage, little hypocrite," Miss Aylmer answered, giving a twitch to the curl nearest her, "and tell me at once why I am left to hear from a third person, that you are about to make your *début*."

"I did not know it myself until this morning," Alix replied, with a mournful sigh. "The *maestro* came in with the decision, papa and mamma ratified it, and when, as a forlorn hope, I appealed to Captain Darcy, he too went against me. If

I had thought you would have helped me to form an opposition, I would have called you into the council, but I knew better."

"Yes, I should have agreed with the rest. If the step is to be taken, it should be made at once. And tell me some of the particulars, for your confidant was too obstinate or too scrupulous to do so. Where are you going to sing? and how? and what? Is it at an amateur concert that you will appear?"

"No, Mr. Rosenberg says that would do me no good. It is too professional, and—but of course you have heard of the famous singer, Madame Baroni, who landed the other day in New York?"

"Of course."

"Well, Mr. Rosenberg, without telling me any thing of his intentions, went to New York to see her, and ask her if she would allow me to appear at the concert she is to give here a few weeks hence. He says she was as kind as possible, and assured him that it would give her sincere pleasure to assist at the *début* of 'a young aspirant for musical honors'—as the newspapers say. Was it not kind?"

"Very. But then, I think, most artists who have climbed the heights of their profession are willing to aid those who are taking the first hard steps. Only, *mignonne*, don't you feel a little afraid of such a wonderful cantatrice as this Baroni must be?"

The child—she was scarcely more than that—looked up with her soft eyes shimmering like stars out of the brave young face.

"I might be," she said, simply, "if it were not for papa and mamma. But, when I think of helping them, I do not feel as if I could be afraid of any thing."

"You are a true knight-errant!" Valerie said, stooping to kiss the fair, up-turned brow. "And you are right! (The older I grow, the more do I think that self-forgetfulness is the best secret of courage.) With it, you will succeed, I think—and, if so, do you mean to go on the lyric stage?"

She shook her head.

"I think not. Papa, I am very sure, would never consent. And, even if he did, mamma's health is too delicate for me to leave her. Besides, I could never succeed there without the prestige of European culture."

"What will you do, then?"

"Remain here, I expect—for some time at least. Mr. Rosenberg says that a public success will open a good many doors to me. *Par exemple*, I am already promised a choir position, with a good salary. Then, I shall sing in concerts, you know."

She spoke very quietly and simply; but, as Valerie listened, a vision rose before her of the luxurious home, where she had first seen this young soldier of fortune, of the fair inheritance of which she was then sole heiress, of the petted life that seemed to stretch before her; and now, in contrast—this! Her voice was hardly steady as she said:

"A poor prospect, Alix, for talent like yours! You are sentencing yourself to the mere drudgery of your profession, when you might earn its highest rewards."

"I know—but what can I do?"

What can I do? A sternly practical question that, which few of us are able to answer for ourselves, far less for others. It was no wonder that Valerie evaded it when she said:

"You should go to Europe."

"You might as well tell me I should go, like a peri, to the gates of Paradise," Alix answered, sadly. "And now—but some one is coming."

The words were scarcely uttered, before Maurice Darcy and Mr. Thornton came from around a tall shrub. After their first greeting was over, Darcy turned at once to the matter which seemed to be just then occupying all of his attention.

"Miss Rivière, Mr. Thornton is very anxious to hear you sing; and I have ventured to promise that you will gratify him. I am sure you will not make me guilty of guaranteeing more than I could perform."

"I am sure you deserve that I should!" said Alix, with a glance which meant more than the words—for she had changed color a little at the ominous beginning. "No man of discretion would risk his word on any thing so unreliable as a woman's caprice.—Don't you think so, Mr. Thornton?"

"No," Mr. Thornton answered; "because the one thing concerning which a woman seldom has a caprice, is the redeeming of a friend's word."

"And that means—"

"It means that Captain Darcy has promised that you will sing, and that I hope you will do so."

He spoke cordially and gracefully, for he was not a man to do things by halves, and did not choose to be ungracious to the songstress, because he really had no desire to hear her; and, as there was little of the conventional young lady in Alix Rivière, she rose at once without further urging.

"Of course I will sing, if you desire it," she said, quietly, though it would be hard to say how much she was secretly trembling. Then she accepted the arm which the formidable critic offered, and walked forward, leaving only one reproachful glance behind for Darcy.

He smiled slightly as he met it, and, turning to Valerie, said:

"You will come also, will you not?"

"Of course," she answered, a little piqued that he should have thought the question necessary. "You do not monopolize *all* interest in Alix, pray remember. I think I deserve credit for a moderate amount at least, and—. Ah, Julian, you are just in time!"

She did not say for what—nor was it necessary that she should, since she held out her hand, and laid it in Romney's readily-tendered arm. If Darcy felt the slight at all, he gave no sign of it, but walked along very quietly by her side, talking of Alix and of Alix's prospects, until they reached the grand piano, to which Mr. Thornton had conducted his charge, and where a group of eager listeners were already gathered. The sweet young face of the girl looked very pale, she had never undergone an ordeal like this before; but Darcy was glad to observe how cool and self-possessed she also seemed. Her gloves were off by the time he gained her side, but it was he who seated her at the piano—whispering a few last words of encouragement as her hands fell on the keys.

"It is a pity she should have to play her own accompaniment," Thornton muttered; but, before he could utter a remonstrance, the tiny, lissome hands had struck their first chords, and the next moment she burst into song.

Valerie saw Darcy flash one glance of triumph at his friend, when the first clear notes fell on the ear. Then he stood satisfied and quiet, while Alix sang with a power and purity which electrified every musical ear in the room, and proved at once her rich natural gift and her careful musical training. The fresh young voice, flexile and reed-like as a flute, was well worth hearing, as it carolled over the most intricate passages and brilliant *roulades*, without one momentary hesitation or faulty cadence; but Thornton's face was still better worth seeing, as astonishment deepened into admiration, and admiration into sincere and absorbed enjoyment. He was completely taken by surprise, and when Alix ceased, and glanced timidly toward him, he held out both his hands with a warmth which nobody had ever seen him display before.

"Miss Rivière," he said, cordially, "I have always, before this, doubted your powers, and I am heartily glad to be able to tell you, what I shall soon tell every one else, that I was entirely mistaken. If you are not yet one of the greatest singers of your day, it will be the fault of yourself—not of Nature."

After that, it was a perfect ovation—a foretaste, perhaps, of many to come—which Madame Vacquant's guests paid to the young songstress thus presented to them. Young and old thronged around the piano, bidding her to play again and yet again—only too eager to follow the path thus marked out for them.

Watching the scene from a distance—for after a while she yielded to Julian's solicitations, and drew back from the crowd—Valerie was glad to see that the gentle, girlish manner lost nothing in simplicity and grace, but that Alix's bearing was quite as frank and unaffected as when she had nestled by the fountain half an hour before. She was very self-possessed, too—for only the deepened roses in her cheeks evinced how fast her every pulse was beating and thrilling. It may be that Darcy was to thank for this

At least he did not leave her side, and it seemed as if his presence might have been the secret of her ease, since an observer more careless than Miss Aylmer could have seen that, whatever others were doing or saying, her eyes and her smile sought continually the kind response of his.

CHAPTER III.

THE DIAMOND OF THE DESERT.

"I THINK," said Valerie, with something of a yawn, "that I will go to see Alix this morning. It has been more than a fortnight since she was here, and I have some curiosity to learn how the *début* comes on."

"It will certainly be a kindness," Madame Vacquant answered—they were quite alone, and perhaps she was glad to dispense with a very restless and listless companion. "I suspect Mrs. Rivière is sick; otherwise I am very sure we should have heard something from them. Shall I order the carriage for you?"

"Thank you, no. It is so clear and bracing, that for once I mean to walk."

"You will find it very cold."

"*Tant mieux!* I feel as if I needed a tonic, and the air may prove one."

She felt as if it had already proved one, when, a few minutes later, the hall-door clanged behind her, and she found herself on the frosty pavements. The day was very cold, but still and bright as possible, so bright that the glittering masses of half-frozen snow were painfully dazzling to the eyes. The air was alive with the music of bells, as sleigh after sleigh dashed past; and the hurrying pedestrians were wrapped to their very noses, as if afraid of the touch of the frost-king. So cold, indeed, that Valerie half repented of her resolution before she had gone very far, and her teeth were chattering like castanets, when, after a walk of five or six squares, she mounted a flight of steps at the Rivières' door, and sent a sharp peal ringing through the house. The servant who answered it informed her that Miss Rivière had gone to take a music-lesson. Mrs. Rivière, however, was at home; and, on asking for her, she was shown in at once.

A flood of sunlight was streaming so brightly across the room into which the maid ushered her, that for a moment Valerie's eyes were quite dazzled; then she recognized the charming home-like aspect of the apartment, though it contained scarcely a single fashionable article of furniture. But a few green plants arranged in a window, a few vases, a few fine engravings, and abundance of books, produced an effect which many a gorgeous drawing-room might have envied. Over the piano hung two pictures which were evidently specially prized. One was the well-known "Matinée bei Liszt," where Berlioz, Czerny, and Ernst, are listening to the great master of the piano-forte harmony; the other, the poet-brow and soul-lit eyes of Felix Mendelssohn. In a niche near the fire stood a low couch, and from this a frail, lovely woman raised herself—a woman whose eyes were bright and whose cheeks aglow with the deceitful lustre and more deceitful bloom of that victor disease which has never yet struck its flag to mortal skill.

She came forward as soon as she saw who her visitor was, and met Miss Aylmer with a very sweet and cordial smile, with a grace too so perfect in its dignity and polish that it contrasted strangely enough with her plain surroundings. Ah! the French say well of many a noble old tradition and custom, "*La Révolution a passé sur tout cela*," and to us of to-day the familiar phrase comes in a newer and sadder sense. Yes, the Revolution passed over much, over almost all that was tender and beautiful in our lives—but it spared us one relic of our past! It wrested from us the fair heritage of our fathers, it tore our hearts, and darkened our lives, it laid upon our freeborn necks the yoke of slavery, it made us exiles and aliens in our native land, it left us scarcely a wish on earth, and scarcely—God help us!—a hope in Heaven, but it failed to take away the high thoughts and noble manners which dignify adversity as much as they ever adorned prosperity. In many an obscure spot, fallen forever from their high

estate, we meet, in poverty and grief, the children of our conquered land, but nor poverty nor grief can change the old frank grace, the old hospitable impulse, the old inborn and kindly courtesy for high and low. Valerie had felt this often; but never more strongly than when this fair gentlewoman came forward now with outstretched hand, and spoke in the soft, flute-like tones that are so sweet in their every accent, and so different from the harsh Northern gutturals!

"Miss Aylmer, I am charmed to see you! I am sorry Alix is not at home. But, if you will accept a very indifferent substitute in her place, you will not have to wait long, I hope. I am expecting her return momently. Pray come to the fire. You must be so cold."

"I was nearly frozen a moment ago," Valerie answered, looking into the soft brown eyes, and with all her heart envying Alix her mother. "But this room is so pleasantly warm, I am already beginning to thaw. If you will allow me, I will lay aside my furs."

"Pray do!—and your hat and cloak also. Let me indulge myself in the luxury of feeling that you are not likely to take wing at any moment, but will certainly be good for an hour or two at least."

Miss Aylmer did not need much persuasion to be induced to comply with this request. Her wrappings were yielded to the soft hand which touched them, and when Alix came in, half an hour later, she found her installed in a low chair by Mrs. Rivière's sofa.

"Valerie! is it you?" she cried, eagerly. "Mary told me there was a lady with mamma—but I never thought of you! I am so glad to see you—so glad you came. Have you been here long?"

"Not very long," Valerie answered, with a smile—"indeed not long at all, if I may trust my own ideas of the length of time. But then I have been very pleasantly engaged, while you—"

"Have been at work," said Alix, gayly, as she came and stood on the hearth-rug, tossing her muff and roll of music on the unoccupied end of her mother's sofa. What a pity it is that everybody's work is not as pleasant as mine! I don't believe I ever *should* tire—even of practising scales and trills.—Mamma, Mr. Rosenberg says my notes in the upper register improve every day!"

"Does he?" said Mrs. Rivière, laughing a little. "I am glad to hear it—but I am afraid he compliments you too much, Alix."

"He is trying to encourage me," said Alix, gravely. "He thinks I don't know that—but I do! The dear *maestro!* It certainly will not be his fault if I fail—"

"It certainly will not be the fault of your own daring," said Valerie, who had opened the roll of music and was looking over it. "Your ambition flies high, I perceive. The 'Magic Flute,' after Mozart!"

"The *maestro* insisted on it," said Alix, apologetically. "I know I cannot give the echo as it should be done—but he insisted!"

"Ah, here is something calculated to take away one's breath—'L'Usignuolo.' Why, *mignonne*, people will say you are bent upon showing how many conjuror's tricks you can play with your voice! And what is this—the 'Isoline' of Stigelli! Why, how many solos are you to sing?"

"Only three," said Alix, smiling. "I shall give that in case of—of"

"An *encore!* Oh, yes, I comprehend—but I suspect you would please your audience better if you sang 'Il Bacio,' or something of that sort, when they call you back. What was it you sang for Mr. Thornton the other night?—I mean your last song."

"That lovely thing of Abt's—'Dort sind wir Herr.'"

"Yes. If you could only give that—but I suppose the *maestro* knows best. If you are not too tired, go to the piano and sing some for me."

"I am never too tired to sing," said Alix; and she crossed the room, humming, as she went, that exquisite *morceau* from the "Acis and Galatea:"

> "'Love in her eyes sits playing
> And sheds delicious death,
> Love on her lips is straying
> And warbling in her breath.'"

Miss Aylmer smiled to herself. She was

fond of tracing cause to effect, and it chanced that she remembered just then how often she had heard Darcy humming those identical strains to himself. She did not mention the coincidence, however, but only bade Alix sing the song for her. After it was finished, she glanced at her watch.

"I wanted to hear these others, but I see I have not time," she said; "so I will only take my favorite aria from 'St. Paul' before I go."

Without answering, Alix changed the measure in which she was playing, struck a few minor chords, and at once began. Mrs. Rivière lay back on her cushions with closed eyes, and, as the full, silvery voice rose in the touching strains of our Lord's lament over the doomed city of Israel—as all that is most fraught with mournful and tender pathos seemed breathed like the voice of a pitying angel in the cadenced rise and fall of the plaintive melody, large tears slowly gathered on her lashes, and rolled one by one like glittering diamonds over her thin cheeks:

"Jerusalem! Jerusalem! thou that killest the prophets, thou that stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered unto thee thy children, and ye would not! Jerusalem!"

But as Valerie listened she seemed to see not the narrow room and the cold winter daylight, but the glowing sky and rich plains of Palestine—not the city streets of throng and noise, but smiling mountains crowned by stately cedars — not ordinary men and women hurrying past, but swarthy forms in picturesque attire, wending their way with camels and horses toward the distant golden line that marked the domain of the desert—not bare and stunted boughs waving past the window, but feathery palms and shining waters—not dull lines of duller brick, but afar off the royal city of David, and the gleaming walls of the magnificent Temple.

It was like a rude sudden call to reality when the music ceased, when one listener dashed away her tears before they had been observed, and the other saw the golden sands, the fringing palms, and distant camels, fade back into the fair Shadow-land, as the singer turned her radiant face toward them. Before either could speak, however, the door opened, and, with an air of a familiar friend, Darcy entered the room. He did not see Valerie, who was partially concealed by the sofa; so, with only a smiling salutation to Mrs. Rivière, he spoke to Alix.

"I am glad to find you in such good voice. I never heard that air better rendered, though I have heard it often. I did not care to disturb you, so I waited in the hall till it was finished."

"That was unnecessary," said Alix, with a laugh. "I would have finished it all the same, if you had come in—and you never disturb me. Music cannot sound very well through a closed door—do you think so, Valerie?"

"Valerie!" Darcy could not help repeating, in a tone of surprise. Then he turned quickly and saw a pair of familiar eyes regarding him from over the arm of Mrs. Rivière's sofa.

"Did you speak to me, Captain Darcy?" their owner asked, with supreme gravity.

"I beg pardon. I really had no idea that you were here," he answered. "No; I did not speak to you when I repeated your name—that is the last liberty I should ever think of taking with Miss Aylmer."

The young lady bowed with a good deal of graceful mockery.

"Miss Aylmer is much obliged to you. It has not often fallen to her lot to be treated with such grandiose respect; and she is grateful accordingly.—Alix, what did you ask me?"

"Nothing much — only whether you thought music would sound well through a closed door?"

"I should say that it depended entirely on the music. We might be very grateful if we could put half a dozen closed doors between ourselves and some forms of melody. Whether or not the 'Jerusalem' was improved by it, however, is a question for Captain Darcy, not me."

It was a question which Captain Darcy did not trouble himself to answer. He only smiled; and, taking up a piece of music, began to ask questions about the all-important *début*. Alix answered them as candidly

and freely as if she had been talking to her own brother; but, naturally enough, the subject (discussed at second-hand) lacked interest to Miss Aylmer. She turned away, and began a conversation with Mrs. Rivière, from which, after a while, her attention was drawn, by hearing Alix exclaim:

"It is finished! Oh, how charming!—Mamma, do you hear this—the 'Diamond of the Desert' is finished!"

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Rivière, with evidently genuine interest. "Captain Darcy, I congratulate you! Or is it a matter for congratulation? I should think it would be a great pleasure to be done—and yet a pain."

"You are right," Darcy said. "It is both. Yet, in this instance, more pleasure than pain, I think; so you may certainly congratulate me."

"I do, then—most heartily. Of course you have seen and admired it?" she added, turning to Miss Aylmer.

"What is 'it'?—a picture? Indeed I have not even heard of it. We see very little of Captain Darcy, and nothing whatever of his pictures."

"This is an old picture—begun long ago—which I am finishing at the request of Mr. Howard," Darcy said. "He saw it in my studio, took a fancy to it, and offered to buy it; so finishing it became a matter of necessity. It has never been a favorite of mine, however; and that is why I feel more pleasure than pain in the consciousness of having it off my hands."

"So much the more shame to you!" cried Alix, indignantly. "Valerie, it is beautiful! You ought to see it—indeed, a bright thought strikes me! Mamma, could you bear to be left alone for a little while?"

"I think I could support the desolation for a reasonable time."

"Well, then, Captain Darcy, will you take us—Valerie and I—down to your studio?"

It would be hard to say who was most surprised by this cool request—Valerie or Darcy. To his credit, however, the latter recovered himself in a moment, and answered readily—

"I shall be very happy to do so."

"But here Valerie interrupted. "I am sorry; but you must excuse me, Alix. I have an engagement at home, and it is time that I went to fulfil it."

"Oh, no, no!" Alix cried, barring the way as she rose. "Indeed, you must do as I say, this once! Never mind about the engagement! No heart will be broken—or, if it is, you can easily mend it again. You don't know what you will miss, if you don't see the 'Diamond of the Desert.' It will not be put on exhibition, but will be sent at once to Mr. Howard. Besides, I want to go, so much! Mamma is not well enough to accompany me—and of course I cannot go alone. I shall not get to see the picture at all again, if you refuse to go with me. O Valerie, please!"

The imploring tones were hard enough to resist, but the fawn-like eyes were infinitely harder; and, after a moment, Miss Aylmer surrendered at discretion, saying: "You were certainly born to have your own way, Alix. If I must play chaperon, for the first time in my life, why—I suppose I must! There! go and get your hat."

"You will go?"

"Yes, I will go."

While Alix ran out of the room, her new chaperon looked round for her furs. They chanced to be lying on the piano, and, as she went there after them, Darcy seized his opportunity and spoke:

"Let me thank you for your kindness in giving Miss Rivière this pleasure. I am very glad you have consented to go."

"I feel as if I ought to apologize to you," she said, coldly. "But you saw how it was—I could not refuse. If it had been possible, I should have done so."

"I am sorry to hear that."

"Are you? I don't mean to be rude—but pray don't let us begin saying pretty things to each other. We have been honest at least, heretofore—let us continue honest to the end. I am going, to please Alix; and you don't mind my presence, since it secures hers. That is the state of the case, I think—and so, we are neither of us at all indebted to the other."

She had been buttoning her cape around as she spoke. She now took up her muff

and walked back to the fireplace, leaving Darcy to think what he pleased of this ungracious rebuff.

After a while Alix came back, as bright and fresh as a sunbeam, and, bidding Mrs. Rivière good-morning, the trio started—wending their way from Eutaw Street down to Charles in the teeth of a cutting wind. They walked briskly, however, and soon reached the large marble building at the corner of Lexington Street, where Darcy had some time since established himself. They climbed a flight or two of stairs, and were rewarded by finding themselves shown into a somewhat cheerless apartment, full of the rubbish and litter that an artist soon gathers around him.

"I am only here temporarily," Darcy said, as he saw Valerie's eye wandering over the empty packing-cases that did duty for chairs and tables, the variously-shaped canvases, the unfinished paintings, paint-boxes, paint-rags, the lay figure draped in an Arab *bernouse*, and the other significantly-artistic tokens of disorder. "It seems scarcely worth while to make one's self comfortable when one may be on the wing any day. Take care of your dress there. Here is the 'Diamond of the Desert' on the easel. Don't compliment it, unless you can do so conscientiously."

"I am not likely to flatter," Valerie answered, with very unmistakable candor. Then she stood and attentively regarded the picture.

If she had expected any thing like the tender and suggestive pathos of "Missing," she must have been very much disappointed. Yet perhaps her first feeling was one of astonishment that the day vision into which she had fallen over the aria from "St. Paul" should be, in part at least, so faithfully represented before her. There were the feathery palms, there the sparkling waters, there the golden sand; there, also, the swarthy, dark-eyed groups in their white turbans and flowing robes, the camels, the barbs, and far off, on the verge of the purple horizon, the domes and minarets of some distant city faintly outlined against the sky. It was a very simple composition—only a group of Arabs resting at an oasis—but it was charmingly painted, the colors soft and clear with all their brilliancy, and a pervading tone of freshness and reality that must have struck the most inattentive observer. It was very evident that of idealization, much less of pure fancy, there was literally nothing—it was plainly a faithful copy, not of Nature in general, but of Nature in particular. The oasis might perhaps have been a shadow of many oases, but no one could doubt the individuality of every one of the Arabs, who had unloaded their camels, dismounted from their horses, and lain down on the fresh turf. Perceiving this, Valerie turned to Darcy, and said, in the tone of one who asserts an undoubted fact:

"You have been in the East, then?"

"Yes," he answered. "I spent several years there; and Eastern scenes were, for a time, my specialty. If I were to put on canvas half the sketches which I outlined on paper—you are fairly tormented with picturesque effects in those countries—I should need two lives instead of one to achieve the mere manual labor."

"And this is a scene from actual life, then?" asked Alix, eagerly.

"Every face there is a portrait," he answered; "from old Yusuf the sheik—you see him sitting crossed-legged by the stream—down to the youngest boy. The oasis itself is to be found not very far outside the walls of Cairo."

"That distant city is Cairo?"

"Yes."

She looked intently at the picture for a long time, then turned and said, half-timidly:

"How I should like to see your sketches!"

"Would you?" he asked, with a soft light in his eyes that almost always came to them at any remark of hers. "Well, that is a very moderate desire, and easily gratified. I have a good many with me, and, if you would care to see them now—or any other time—"

"Now, of course," she said, eagerly. "Valerie, don't you say so?"

But Valerie did not hear. She was looking at the picture, through her half-closed hand, and did not even notice that

the others turned away. When she did at last wake, with a start, to a consciousness of their absence, and look around, they were deep in a large portfolio, and so absorbed that her presence was not at all necessary to their enjoyment. After one glance, she moved away in an opposite direction. The studio was a narrow but rather long apartment, and, as she strolled toward the lower end of it—pausing now and then to examine the unfinished pictures and outline etchings which lined the walls—she almost lost sight of those two heads bending down together, behind the large easel. It was quite involuntarily that, coming at last to a corner where several canvases were stacked together, she turned the first one around. A glimpse was enough to make her draw it into a better light, and then she stood transfixed by admiration.

The scene represented an opera-box, from which, drawing aside the curtain with one hand, a girl, with a face of richly-tinted beauty, looked forth in what seemed a flush of triumphant power and self-possession. At least the attitude could only have been so interpreted—there was such a regal *pose* of the head, such a challenge in the dark eyes, rippling over with all the sunny light and soft languor of the South. An ivory-mounted lorgnette lay on the cushions before her, together with a libretto and one white kid glove, while a half-closed fan was held to the scarlet lips by the most slender of hands. The shoulders, from which the cloak had slipped back, gleamed lustrously white against a dark background, and the whole effect was so glowing and perfect, that Valerie exclaimed half aloud, "How exquisite!"

Yet, even as the words passed her lips, a discovery flashed upon her which made her sink into a seat, and stare at the picture in blank amazement. Surely there was something strangely familiar in the face, which bent so graciously and smilingly toward her! Surely she had met before the soft depths of those liquid eyes! There was no doubt of it—*the face was her own!*

What she would have said or done, it is impossible to conjecture, for at that moment a quiet voice behind her asked:

"And what do you think of your likeness?"

She started and turned—for once visibly confused—to meet the smiling eyes of Maurice Darcy.

"Mine! is it really mine?" she stammered.

"Can there be a doubt of it? Did you ever see a face like that, out of your mirror?"

"But how could you—I never gave you a sitting!"

He laughed outright.

"Never a conscious one, I grant you; but I am very quick to catch a likeness, and you know I have seen you constantly. I ought to explain and apologize, perhaps," he added, more seriously. "You would have a right to think that I had taken a great liberty, if I did not assure you that I have only done so to gratify my uncle. He saw some of my portraits once, and said that he would like me to paint yours. I knew you would never consent to a course of sittings, so I could only promise him to catch the likeness without troubling you—and that is my excuse."

Valerie bit her lips quickly; and it would be hard to tell—hard, perhaps, for herself to have told—the cause of the sudden shadow which came over her face, as if his explanation had been in some sense a disappointment.

"You give me credit for more perversity than I possess," she said, coldly. "Of course I would have sat for you—if grandpapa wished it."

"It was more the desire to spare you a disagreeable thing, than a belief in your perversity, which induced me to choose this mode of obtaining a portrait," he answered. "You see I have succeeded—moderately at least."

"I see you have flattered my face almost beyond recognition."

"You think so?" and his eye travelled, with the quick artist-gaze, from original to copy, and then back again. "Well—I do not agree with you."

"I doubt if you are a good judge," she retorted. "How should you know anything about my face? You certainly don't know me."

"Is that a necessary preliminary?"

"I have always thought so."

"And I have always thought the reverse. Instead of knowing the face from the character, we know the character from the face. That is the reason why artists are generally good physiognomists."

Valerie looked quickly at the picture. There were many soft lights common to her face, many gentle and tender expressions to her eyes—but none of them were there. The artist's hand had transferred to his canvas, line by line, and tint by tint, her physical beauty, but never a shadow of aught that was spiritually lovely. In the brilliant eyes she only saw the satisfaction of conscious power; on the perfect lip, only a smile of haughty vanity. She turned to him at last, and spoke with a strange bitterness in her voice.

"Then what I see in that face is your conception of my character?"

"Do you object to it?" he asked, smiling.

She made a gesture of impatience. "That is no reply to my question. Please be good enough to answer me."

Then he answered, gravely: "It is the only one I have been able to form. We judge according to sight, you know."

"Yes," she said, with a half gasp, "we judge according to sight—no matter how far wrong sight may take us. Not that you are wrong in this. You may be very right. No one knows less than I do."

At that, she turned away, and walked toward Alix, who looked up in some surprise.

"How long you have been, dear!" she said. "I sent Captain Darcy for you, and I thought neither of you was coming back. I wanted to show you this scene in Damascus. Is it not charming—just like the Arabian Nights?"

"Yes, exactly," Valerie answered, as she bent over the sketch. A moment later, one large hot drop had blurred the dome of a mosque thereon, though where it came from no one could tell.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE HEIGHTS.

As the days went on, and the time of Miss Rivière's *début* approached, a knowledge of the fact which, up to that time, had been kept a partial secret, began to transpire among her friends and acquaintances. Consequent upon this, the poor child was forced to run a gantlet of inquiries and remonstrances, of dark intimations of failure, and darker threats of certain social penalties that in such a case would be enforced against her and hers. All this came suddenly and without preparation, and those who knew her best scarcely realized the courage with which she had nerved herself for the issue until they saw how gallantly she breasted this preliminary storm of opposition. If such an ordeal had been foretold for her, no doubt they would all have feared that it would shake her resolution. But, on the contrary, it only seemed to strengthen it. Inquiries she answered with calm affirmation; remonstrances she put aside with quiet disdain; while the threats of social penalty brought a more scornful light to her eyes than had ever been seen there before. "What is your idol to me?" she cried, contemptuously. "When we were rich and prosperous, society was at our feet—in our reverses, it has barely tolerated us, extending one finger when we met! Now it may ignore us, for all I care. Our friends we shall keep—the rest are better lost than retained!" For the prophecies of failure, she had only one answer—"That remains to be proved." And, as she went on her way, all faithful and unsparing of labor to herself, all gentleness and tenderness to her parents, all steadfast defiance to the world, many thought, and Valerie among them, that they had never witnessed a more touching and beautiful sight.

But still there were moments when the head drooped and the courage gave way—moments when the poor little flower came to her friend trembling and downcast. "Oh, I dread it so unspeakably!" she would say, with her wistful eye full of tears. "I am

afraid— oh, I am terribly afraid! I feel as if I should not be able to utter one note when I stand before all that sea of faces. I feel as if something would rise up in my throat and choke me, and that I shall end by disgracing myself."

"And gratifying all your kind friends," said Miss Aylmer, coolly. "Don't forget that!"

"Yes, that is just it!" she cried passionately. "It almost kills me to think how they will exult and shake their heads, and say 'Poor thing, I told her so!' And when I think of them, I feel that I *will* succeed."

"Think of them all the time, then."

"Ah, but sometimes even that thought fails me. Sometimes I feel as if to meet the cold glances and the critical eyes must extinguish all my courage, and that I shall cover my face with my hands and cry out to Mr. Rosenberg to take me away. I can see myself do it, as plainly as if I were looking at a picture."

"Alix, you must put such fancies as these out of your head—you must not encourage them. They are enough to make you fail. There is no danger—there cannot be the least danger—if you do not give way to nervous fear. Think what your failure would be to your parents!"

"I do think of it," she answered, mournfully. "That thought alone enables me to persevere. I try to remember that God has given me one talent—one poor little ewe-lamb—and I must not strangle it with my own hands when it may enable me to aid them. But Valerie, Valerie, it is hard—harder than I ever thought it would be!"

Mrs. Rivière, too, confided to Valerie forebodings which were never by any chance betrayed to Alix herself. "She suffers very much," the mother said; "and it pains me to the heart to think that I cannot aid her in bearing it. My poor child! So young, and so totally unfit for such a burden!"

"But she has such a brave heart," Miss Aylmer answered. "And she is so confident of her own power! Do not fear. She is resolved to succeed—she will do so."

Mrs. Rivière shook her head. All Alix's buoyant bearing had not availed to deceive those watchful eyes. "You are mistaken," she said. "You do not look so closely as I do, or you would hear many a quiver under those gay tones, and see many a doubt lurking under that bright smile. She is brave, but she is fighting against her own fear. I begin to dread lest it prove an unequal combat; I begin to think that at the very last she may fail, from pure nervous terror."

"I cannot think so," Miss Aylmer said—but, in truth, she began to be dismayed herself. "I cannot believe but that the occasion will give her the courage of desperation, and so carry her through."

"I do not know whether to wish for it or not. It might be better for her not to sing at all, than to sing so badly that she will ruin her future prospects."

"Does Mr. Rosenberg share your fears?" Valerie asked, after a pause.

"Not at all. But then Mr. Rosenberg, like yourself, does not look below the surface."

"You do me great injustice," the other protested. "I do look below the surface, and I see all that natural fear and doubt to which you allude. But I don't believe that it will prevent Alix from appearing, and from doing full justice to her voice when she does appear. And now, dear madame, it remains for time to show which of us is the true prophet."

"I doubt if anybody ever desired more earnestly that honor should fall on a rival's head," Mrs. Rivière said, smiling; "or if ever a prophet was more willing to forfeit all claim to the reputation of seer."

Strange to say, for once in her life Madame Vacquant acted in a manner which nobody expected of her. Notwithstanding her previous censure of such a step, she took up Alix's cause warmly, applauded her courage, promised all possible assistance, and in short (to Mr. Rosenberg's great disgust!), took the whole affair under her sublime wing. What was the meaning of this sudden change of opinion, it would be difficult to say; but there was at least good reason for supposing that the consideration of Darcy's *penchant*, and a desire to encourage it, had something to do with the matter. Certain

.y there was a long consultation wih Julian, then the carriage was ordered, and the lady drove straight to the Rivières to tender her all-powerful aid and countenance. Of course it was gratefully accepted—the more gratefully, because almost every other one of their newly-made friends had been loud in remonstrance, or cold in disapproval; and also because the world of fashion was always sure to follow wherever that white finger pointed. When Madame Vacquant said in her soft, high-bred voice, "My dear, I will be glad to do all in my power to insure your success," she was pledging not only herself, but the entire *beau monde;* and Alix, knowing this, was proportionably warm in thanks—thanks that would not have been rendered if there had been a suspicion of vulgar patronage in the matter. But her worst enemy never failed to admit that the fair society-leader knew how to confer a favor with inimitable tact and grace; and she was scarcely likely not to have employed both the one and the other here.

The day of the concert at last came, and in the afternoon Miss Aylmer went to see whether Alix's courage wavered or increased as the hour of fate approached. She found her sitting by her mother's sofa, very quiet, very pale, but also very composed. They both glanced up with a smile when the well-known face came in, and Alix gave one cry—

"She is charming!"

"Who is charming?" Valerie asked.

"Why, Madame Baroni, of course!" the other answered, a little indignantly. "Who else should I mean? Mr. Rosenberg took me to see her this morning—and oh, Valerie, I can never be afraid of her again!"

"Well, that is one comfort," her friend replied. "I should think this might serve to convince you that your other fears are quite as shadowy.—Mrs. Rivière, does she need a tonic?"

"I don't think so," Mrs. Rivière answered, with her peculiarly sweet smile. "She went off very pale and trembling to see Madame Baroni; but she came back full of courage, and I don't believe it has ebbed since."

"She is so kind," Alix said, with effusion. "It would have been ungrateful to feel afraid any more—at least of her. She encouraged me to persevere—praised my voice—told me about her own *début*, when she was so frightened she could scarcely sing a note—and predicted that some day I would be a great cantatrice. Think of that, mamma!"

"Yes, think of it," Valerie said. "Think of cities at your feet, and nations ringing with your praise, of whole assemblies transported to enthusiasm by your voice, and of ovations that royalty might envy—"

"Not to speak of substantial profits."

"Not at all. Oh, child, how happy you are!—and how little you appreciate your happiness! You hold your future in your own hand, and you win bread and fame by the exercise of that which is to you delight. Think of the myriads who spend life in a toil that is utterly hateful to them; and thank God for giving you the capability of labor that can be loved."

"I do," she said, humbly; "I do thank Him with all my heart. I look at the poor drudges who teach, at the poor slaves who sew, and I ask myself what have I done to be so greatly blessed above them—blessed in a gift, but, for which, I could anticipate no higher existence than theirs."

"And when you think of Music—of her grand and glorious loveliness—of the beauty that is nearer Heaven than aught else left us at the Fall—do you not feel your terrors grow petty and unworthy in presence of a mistress so sublime?"

"Yes," she said, with the shining smile of a St. Cecilia, "I do—indeed I do!"

"That, then, is a point where it will be well to leave you," and she rose to go. "No, I cannot stay longer. It will soon be time for you to begin your toilet, and I must not detain you from that. Alix, when I see you again, the Rubicon will be passed; and, as I now say to you, be of good heart.—and prove that the blood which has made the sons of our land famous is not less fruitful of heroism in her daughters. So I will then congratulate you on having wor a twofold victory: one over circumstance, and a harder one over yourself."

"God grant it!" said the mother's solemn tones.

"Amen!" said Alix, softly.

When Miss Aylmer reached home, it was nearly sunset, and the western sky had been dazzling her eyes with its glory, so that she did not at all recognize a dark figure hurrying forward to meet her until they met on the door-step, and then she saw Romney. As he uncovered his head, and the full light of the incarnadine west fell over his face, she was startled to observe how worn and pale he looked.

"Julian!" she said, stopping short. "Something is surely the matter—or has happened to you. What is it?"

She asked the question anxiously, but it was more the anxiety of one who fears some unpleasant responsibility, than that of a woman quick to perceive through her affections.

"Nothing of any importance," he answered, with a forced smile; "at least I don't suppose you would consider it of importance. Your friend Miss Rivière seems to occupy all your available attention just now."

"I thought she needed it, but you look this evening as if you needed it more. Pray tell me what is the matter—if it is any thing I can help."

"So you don't care to hear, in case that it is not?"

"Did I say that? How strangely perverse you are! Surely you are not foolish again," she added, a little impatiently.

"If foolish means jealous, no," he answered. "But—ah, the door is open, and perhaps it is as well I should not take all Charles Street into my confidence. Will you come in?"

She went in, but paused at the foot of the staircase with decided determination on her face.

"Now," she said, "I insist on the completion of that sentence. But—what?"

"As if you cared!" he said, passionately. "As if I might not be swept out of your path to-morrow without your sending a single sigh after me—unless it was a sigh of relief! For Heaven's sake, don't mock me with such a question, or—I will not answer for the consequences. You should not tempt me to break your own commands, and then grow angry at the temerity."

"I did not mean to do that," she said, softly—moved more than she cared to confess by his tone and manner—then she came a step nearer and laid her hand on his arm. "Julian! why will you always speak of me as if I were ready to work you great harm? Why not regard me as one who would do almost any thing to spare you pain?"

"*Almost* any thing?"

"Yes."

"Then," he said, with something of a hoarse laugh, "be sure I will test you very soon. There! I dare not say any thing more now. And don't look at me in that way, or—I will! You have to dress, I know. Don't let me detain you."

"I am going, but—say something first, that is like yourself. I can't bear to leave you in such a mood."

"What shall I say? That your eyes were never brighter or your voice more sweet—that is like my usual self, I believe. But I should think you would grow tired of such platitudes."

"Yes, tired and vexed," she answered, withdrawing her hand, and turning away. "I don't understand you. I did not think you would treat me so, but—no matter!"

He let her go without a word, and she was half-way up the staircase, before he suddenly rushed after her, caught her hand, and, before she knew it, had pressed it many times, passionately to his lips.

"Julian!" she cried, half-angrily.

Then he dropped it, and looked up with imploring eyes.

"Forgive me!" he said. "Forgive me, not for this, but for my churlish despair. Yes, I will hope. It is only a coward who dare not do so. You shall not find me in this mood again."

Nor did she—at least not that night. When she came down to dinner, it was a very gay and gallant cavalier who met her at the door of the dining-room, and, while dessert was still on the table, the carriage was announced.

"We cannot afford to be late to-night," said Madame Vacquant, rising at once. "I

would not miss Alix's first appearance for any consideration. My dear, I am so sorry you cannot come"—this to M. Vacquant, whom the gout kept at home.—"Maurice, may I trouble you for my cloak?"

While Darcy dutifully wrapped the white folds around her stately figure, Julian was performing the same office for Valerie; and, in so doing, found time to ask:

"Am I forgiven?"

"That depends on your future conduct," she answered, with a bright smile. "But you must take me down to the carriage as an earnest of it."

They soon disembarked before the brilliant entrance of the Concordia; but, truth to tell, Valerie had very little appreciation or recollection of the concert *as* a concert. And after-events completely drove from her mind even the faintest remembrance of how the great prima donna sang. Mr. Rosenberg had thought it best for no one to be with Alix but himself, so the Vacquant party found Mr. and Mrs. Rivière in the orchestra-chairs, adjoining their own—chairs very near the stage, and altogether the best in the house for the double purpose of seeing and hearing. Valerie's heart was with the poor child who was struggling, and fighting herself, all alone behind the scenes; and, for once in her life, she was deaf even to music. She had only a faint, dream-like impression of the magnificent-looking woman, with her powerful voice, her brilliant execution, her gleaming silk, and flashing jewels, who brought down such storms of applause from the house. Even a Polonaise of Chopin, and a concerto of Mendelssohn, failed to move her. She heard little, and saw less, until near the close of the first part, an eager movement of Mrs Rivière's said more plainly than words, "There she is!"—and a round of welcoming applause made Valerie look up quickly to see Mr. Rosenberg's white-kid gloves leading forward a brown-eyed Titania in a cloud of India muslin.

All the interested party drew their breath quickly, and then held it in a sharp tension of anxiety and hope. Indeed, the most indifferent stranger might have found it hard to gaze quite unmoved at the fair face and childlike form of the young *débutante*, as she stood before the foot-lights in all the solitary grace of her youth. She looked so refined, so modest, so altogether beautiful, that there was a quickening interest on many a face lately apathetic, and a half-murmured, "How lovely!" from many lips lately careless. Lovely, indeed, she was—rarely lovely; but one glance at the poor little flower showed those eager eyes watching her so closely that her courage was ebbing fast. She was terribly pale, and trembled visibly—but she was making a brave battle of it, and fighting a stern fight for self-control. The first spontaneous tribute of applause subsided, was acknowledged by a timid salutation, and then silence settled over the house—silence profound and expectant; but, to that trembling heart, who shall say how awful! Mr. Rosenberg took his seat at the piano, the first violinist of the orchestra drew his bow softly across the strings; but the singer seemed momently losing both self-possession and self-control. The *maestro* was evidently very uneasy. He played a prelude of unusual length—during the course of which Valerie saw Alix's fingers lacing and interlacing over the sheet of music she held, and her breast heaving convulsively—but at last he could delay no longer. He murmured something hurriedly over his shoulder, and struck the first chords of the accompaniment. Alix made one desperate effort to sing—her voice failed her! Another equally desperate—with equally ill success. Then she paused, evidently struggling with a wild desire to burst into tears, and rush from the stage. The stillness of the next few minutes was terrible. Mrs. Rivière laid her hand down on the one beside her with a grasp Miss Aylmer never forgot; but her glance did not once turn from her daughter's face. Mr. Rosenberg rose and went to Alix's side, the leader of the orchestra leaned forward, and spoke a few kind words of encouragement. But it all seemed to little purpose, and a perfect despair settled over the watchers. To fail—and thus! Murmurs of compassion began to be heard, together with well-meant whispers of "Better take her off!"

At that moment Darcy, who was sitting just behind Valerie, laid his hand on her shoulder. "Let her mother show herself," he whispered, eagerly. "That will restore her courage—if any thing can!" Miss Aylmer turned to Mrs. Rivière, but she had heard him, and immediately rose to her feet, and leaned forward toward the stage, utterly unmindful that she was thus a mark for the observation of the whole house, if the house had not been too much occupied to observe her. Alix's eyes were wistfully turned on the audience, as if seeking that face among all others, and many noticed the start with which she recognized it. The effect was scarcely less instantaneous. Color flashed into her cheeks, and light into her eyes; she made a motion as if swallowing some impediment in her throat, and, laying her hand on Mr. Rosenberg's arm, pointed to the piano. He hesitated, but she said a few words, and he resumed his seat. Then, as she once more fronted the audience, with resolution on her face—such resolution as that with which men go to storm a battery—some kindly chivalric hand in the gallery gave a signal of applause, to which the body of the house eagerly responded. When it subsided, the battle was fought and won! She began to sing, and the first tone of her voice assured everybody that the worst was over, and that no further hesitation was to be feared. Perhaps it was desperation which gave her strength, but at least it bore her bravely through. She had never in her life done fuller justice to herself or to her teacher. Even those whose hearts were bound up in her forgot for the moment the singer in the music, and listened with enraptured attention to those fairy-like cadences, that exquisite elfin rise and fall of delicious harmony which is the immortal heritage bequeathed us by the master's immortal genius. There was not a musical ear in the house which was not charmed by the sweetness and compass of those wonderful notes, which did not perceive at once the rare natural power of the voice, and the purity of execution, the almost perfect style of the vocalization. They had expected at best little more than a mediocre capability in this trembling *débutante*, and they found themselves completely taken by surprise! When the last echo of the "Magic Flute" died away, there was a pause of absolute astonishment; then the Concordia walls had rarely echoed to a more overwhelming torrent of applause than broke forth in one wild storm. The Rubicon was passed indeed! As far as this generous city was concerned, the young exile's fame was made—and even now they were calling her back with every token of fervid enthusiasm. Half-frightened, and trembling more than ever, Alix was led back, and when at last the curtain fell, at the end of the first part, it was amid the still echoing sounds of that which is sweeter than all other music to the ear professional.

In the interval which followed, all the Rivières's acquaintances gathered round the proud and happy parents with warm congratulations. First of all, came Mr. Thornton, though he knew neither of them personally, and held out his hand with frank cordiality. "The tone-world has gained another star!" he said—and it was worth while saying it, to see the bright smile which came, in answer, over Mrs. Rivière's face. But, though such compliments as these are the pleasantest of all compliments in the world, no one was sorry when the curtain rose again and the concert recommenced. La Baroni sang with all the power and spirit which had gained her a world-wide fame; but, nevertheless, there were others now, besides the small group of immediate friends, who eagerly waited the reappearance of the new songstress. At last she came—smiling, blushing, all alive with the full, delicious realization of her success. And how divinely she sang! How purely and evenly the tide of melody flowed from the slender throat—how rich, yet flexile, the voice proved itself whenever there was a demand on strength or a trial of skill—how exquisitely birdlike were the trills—how regular and smooth the scales—how brilliant the whole execution! It was no wonder that the people applauded as if they were mad; that they encored her again and yet again; or that, when she was recalled for the third time, and stood before them with her glowing face and happy eyes, even ladies joined in the enthusiastic outburst.

and gave up their bouquets to be cast at her feet.

CHAPTER V.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

Suddenly a startled voice cried, "Look at Mrs. Rivière!" and, turning quickly, Miss Aylmer saw that she was lying back in her chair, white as marble, with her eyes closed, and a crimson tide flowing from her lips. Her husband had not heard the first voice, but he caught Valerie's exclamation of horror, and turned also.

In a moment his face was almost as pale as hers.

"My God!" he cried, "it is another hæmorrhage!"

The words had scarcely passed his lips, before all was confusion in their immediate vicinity—a number of people pressing forward, an uproar of voices, a dozen different demands in a dozen different keys. Salts—ammonia—water—a fan—the carriage—a doctor—all were recommended and called for in a breath, as it were, while those farther off only thought a lady had fainted from the heat The house went on thundering its plaudits, Alix went on bowing and smiling, while her mother's life was bleeding away.

Yet the confusion did not last long. It scarcely needed the grave face of the hastily-summoned physician to assure the gazers that Azrael had made his own time, and that she on whom they gazed had received the summons which none ever disobey. There was something unspeakably awful—something that no one, looking on, ever forgot—in the contrasts of the scene. Here, the garish realm of pleasure and life, the glittering, swaying crowd, the painted arabesqued walls, the brilliant lights, the illuminated stage—there, the ghastly shadow, the inexorable presence of agony and death. Fortunately the concert was over—all, save an orchestral piece which nobody seemed to care about hearing—Alix had vanished, and the house was emptying fast. The pealing instruments rose and swelled in a harmony which only served to keep time to the rustle and tread of departing numbers, but which formed the last element of discordance in this horrible scene. Nobody seemed to notice them, excepting Miss Aylmer; but she, who was kneeling by the insensible women, looked up at Darcy with a piteous appeal. "For Heaven's sake, go and tell them—go and stop them!" she said. He went, and, a moment later, the gay strain ceased, and the ghastly death-march was over. But, years afterward, Valerie heard that air played by other musicians, in a far-distant land, and it brought back, as vividly as if she again gazed upon it, the scene of that night, with all its terrible accompaniments.

After the first shock was over, Mr. Rivière recovered something of his usual self-possession, and sent a note to Mr. Rosenberg, bidding him detain Alix until some one called for her. Then Mrs. Rivière was slowly carried out of the empty house to the carriage which was waiting for her. Miss Aylmer seemed most to retain self-possession, and so it was to her that the doctor turned when he said, "Get in!" She did not understand what he meant to require of her, but she obeyed at once. After she was in the carriage, Mrs. Rivière was laid half on the seat, half within her arms, and the doctor following, with Mr. Rivière, they drove rapidly away. Nobody mentioned Alix, but Valerie's heart was full of her, and it was a great relief to remember that Darcy had taken on himself the duty of telling her, and bringing her after them. Valerie now began to realize something of what he was, as a sure and steadfast help in time of need; at least there was no one else who could have given her such a feeling of confidence that the blow to that poor, unprepared heart would be softened as much as human care and tenderness can soften such a stroke—and, God knows, that is little enough!

It was very strange and awesome, that drive! Every thing seemed so terrible, and had been so sudden, that it was all unreal to Valerie; and, once or twice, she half-wondered if she were awake, as the carriage rolled on over the paving-stones, as the passing gleams of the street-lamps fell across the

death-like face, pillowed on her white opera cloak, and the two men sat opposite, like graven images, neither speaking, and the doctor only leaning forward now and then to lay his finger on the faint pulse.

The hæmorrhage had almost entirely ceased by the time they reached upper Eutaw Street, and, lifting the frail form with as little difficulty as if she had been a child, Mr. Rivière bore it into the house which she had left so shortly before in all the flush of life's fullest hopes. He made no pause on the lower floor, though the doctor would fain have drawn him into the first room they reached, but passed directly on to her own chamber, laying her gently and tenderly down on the bed from which she would never rise again.

Every thing that ensued was afterward a very dim remembrance to Miss Aylmer. She knew that she must have been cool and capable of intelligent service, at the time, for it was to her that the doctor made his demands for every thing he needed, and it was on her that the duty of bringing the frightened household to some order fell. She had not more than accomplished this, and taken her place once more to wipe away the red drops that still slowly came from between the parted lips, when a carriage drove almost at a gallop up to the door. There was the sound of quick voices and hurrying feet, and, before the doctor could interfere to prevent, Alix had rushed into the room, and thrown herself on her knees by her mother's bedside.

"O, mother, mother!" she cried, "is *this* my triumph?—O God! she is dead!—it is I who have killed her!"

"Hush!" said the doctor, sternly, and, laying a heavy hand on her shoulder, forced her away. "You *will* kill her, if you bring on that hæmorrhage again! Hush, madam!"—this to Mrs. Rivière — whose lids quivered and whose pale lips faintly strove to speak. "I command you to hush—your life depends upon it! There must not be one word spoken in this room—either by you or any one else.—Miss Rivière, come with me down-stairs."

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed poor Alix, with a piteous cry of entreaty. "Let me stay with her!—do let me stay with her! I will not utter another word—I promise that! Only try me—you can send me away, if I do!"

The doctor released his hold. He evidently did not like to trust her, and did so reluctantly. But she sank on her knees again so hushed and still that, after a moment, he turned away and went to Miss Aylmer.

"I suppose I can depend on you?" he said, shortly. "Don't, on any pretext, allow a word to be spoken—especially by Mrs. Rivière herself, or—" he pointed over his shoulder to Alix. "Keep perfect silence. I have sent for Preston, and I must go down-stairs a moment. If there is any change, call me."

Valerie bent her head, and he walked away. From some cause or other, he did not return for a considerable time, and the still, solemn aspect of the chamber seemed to awe and oppress Miss Aylmer, like the very presence of death itself. In lesser degree, there was the same contrast which had given so much deeper horror to the scene in the opera-house, only now the world was subordinate—sunk into nothing as it were, by the side of that eternity which was so near at hand. We are told very often that we walk on the border of eternity, that there is ever only a thin veil between our faces and its awful mysteries; but it is doubtful whether we ever realize the fact until we are brought face to face with some swift tragedy in which the curtain is lifted before our eyes, and we catch a glimpse—a brief, fleeting glimpse—of the existence beyond, and of its unspeakable nearness to our daily lives. Just now, Valerie had this glimpse—just now she seemed to feel in every throb of her own abounding life the sense of death which we carry about with us all the time, and the actual presence of that shadowy world—which in our poor human blindness we call shadowy, when indeed it alone is real!—at whose entrance, this life, now fading from earth, was soon to stand. She had not often before come face to face with death and it was long before the scene on which she gazed ceased to haunt her. There lay

the almost dying woman, with her white face and faintly-pulsating breast—so faintly pulsating, that more than once Valerie thought the breath had ceased. The dim, hushed room looked vast and weird with the dark shadows gathering in its corners, and the outline of its still figures thrown in gigantic relief on the walls. Mr. Rivière stood so unmoving at the side of the bed that he might have been taken for a sculptured figure, while the gala-dress of Alix, with its misty flounces and French roses, lay all unheeded on the floor, as she knelt with only a convulsive quiver now and then running over her frame; while Valerie, in her shining silk and blood-stained cloak, sat on the bed, with her fingers on the failing pulse of the hand that was lightly clasping hers.

It seemed as if many hours passed thus; but it could not have been nearly one—since the confessor who had been summoned in haste had not yet arrived—when a slight pressure of her hand made Valerie bend over Mrs. Rivière to see what she desired. Before it was possible to remonstrate, she had whispered four words—weak and low, yet quite distinct:

"Comfort my poor child."

Scarcely were they spoken, before the effort brought on the hæmorrhage again—and the red tide gushed once more from her lips over the pillows. Alix sprang to her feet and fled to the head of the stairs, calling wildly for the doctor. He came—looked—placed his finger on the pulse—then turned to Mr. Rivière, and said aloud, but very gently, "She is dying."

Mrs. Rivière evidently heard the words. Perhaps he had wished that she should. Her eyes opened slowly, and met his with an expression which said, "I know it." Then they turned to Valerie, and, remembering the appeal of a moment before, she answered instinctively, "I will—I will!"—and that strangely-expressive glance wandered to Alix, who stood a little back from the bed, her hands hanging loosely at her side, and a stony horror on her face. The rapidly-dimming sight dwelt on her face for a moment, in unutterable and pitying love; and then the last look turned to her husband, who was bending over with agony too great for utterance. What a volume was in that long gaze!—so much that was perfectly intelligible to the stranger looking on, that it must have been plain as spoken words to him. Once the steady regard was raised toward heaven—returning immediately to fix itself again on his—and the poor blood-covered lips strove to fashion themselves into a smile—last token of the love which was undying. Neither eyes nor lips moved again.

It scarcely needs to dwell on the desolation which followed. All of us have passed through, or will pass through, such valleys of the shadow of death, and all of us know the black pall which at such times comes over all things—shutting out even the sunlight of God's smile. With Alix, sorrow took the form of dumb apathy. She crouched by the side of that which was once her mother, and moaned to herself like some stricken wild creature of the forest, all the day long!—she paid no heed to any one—no voice was powerful enough to rouse her—people came and went, spoke to her, talked of her, but she never raised her head—she never acknowledged any other presence than that of the dead. Perhaps of all the forms of human grief, there is none more touching, none more hopeless than this, none so powerful to wring our own hearts with the sorrow of unavailing pity! When thirty-six hours had passed, and still the stunned quiescence was unbroken, still no morsel of food had crossed the pale lips, the doctor thought it necessary to interfere. "This will never do!" he said, decidedly. "The body must be removed as soon as possible, or this child will die." Accordingly the funeral arrangements were hastened, and, on the third day after death, they buried away in the kind bosom of Mother Earth the cold shell of mortality that had once enshrined so fair and pure a spirit. To the last, Alix was resolved to attend the funeral. But Nature had already been taxed too far. When she went to take a last look of her mother's face, and she saw the lovely and ineffable peace that reigned in every line of it in contrast with her own grief-torn heart, the poor child gave way in

one mighty rush of emotion, that cast her prostrate beneath its violence.

"O mother, mother!" she sobbed, as the burning shower ran over the face of her who never before had been unconscious of her voice, or deaf to her suffering. "Mine is the anguish, but yours the peace! All is over for you—all pain, all fear, all trouble! Your rest is won—but oh, my burden is heavy, heavier than I can bear without you! Oh, come back to me—or teach me at least to say 'Thy will be done.'"

She was borne away unresisting, and a strong opiate administered by the doctor's orders. "She will rest now," he said. And she did rest—so deeply that the sad procession passed out of the darkened house, as she lay in unconscious slumber. And while in the dim cathedral the solemn tones of a requiem mass were chanted over the silent dust, she still slept—still forgot her pangs for a brief while, as she lay with a crucifix clasped in her hand, and so sweet a smile on the pallid face, that Valerie hushed her breath, thinking it must be that the mother's spirit had come to comfort her even from those—

"Shores where tideless sleep the seas of Time
Soft by the city of the saints of God."

CHAPTER VI.

REAPING THE HARVEST.

A FORTNIGHT after this, Valerie was still domiciled at the Rivières'. Her heart—always a gentle and pitiful heart to sorrow and distress—had been sorely touched, and she was as loath to leave Alix and go back to the dissipations of the Vacquant household, as Alix would have been loath to see her go. Indeed, as the first wild violence of grief abated, giving place to that deep and settled sorrow which time alone can heal, there came also the aching sense of desolation—the deep longing for human love and companionship which made Valerie's presence with her a positive necessity. Already, however, the former had mooted a plan which could alone secure this companionship for any length of time. Already, she had declared her anxiety, that Alix should leave her own home, so full as it was of painful memories, and accompany her to Washington Place. By degrees only could the latter be brought to entertain such a proposition. She clung passionately to the spot last associated with her mother, and even her father's persuasions were of little avail. Indeed, when no other excuse was left, she would look up at Valerie piteously, and say, "But I cannot leave poor papa all alone." To this Miss Aylmer wisely forbore immediate answer, for she was sure that even the daughter's eyes could not long fail to perceive that her absence would be to her father more a relief than a deprivation. His love for his wife had been singularly devoted; but there was little or nothing of what is called "the domestic man" in his nature. He tolerated home-life for her sake; but he never learned to like it for its own, and the most superficial observer could not have failed to perceive how strong was his desire to escape the haunting presence of grief—embodied in the darkened house, the vacant couch, his daughter's pale face and black dress—and plunge headlong into the world. There was no doubt but that he would be unfeignedly glad to see Alix safely established at M. Vacquant's fireside, and to lock within the vacant house the ghost of his past life and his dead love.

Nor was it very long before this desire was plainly manifest even to Alix; not long before she yielded a reluctant consent to Valerie's entreaties, and those which Madame Vacquant came in person to add; not long before she bade a weeping farewell to the rooms where her mother's smile last shone on her, and was driven away to the stately Vacquant mansion, where a sunny room awaited her, and where one heart at least was ready to give her a tender and unwearied attention.

Is it necessary to say that this heart beat within the broad chest of Maurice Darcy? Truly, if he had seemed to like this fair child before, he now devoted himself to her with an affection that was touched into deep reverence by her silent but enduring grief. Her mother could not have watched over Alix with more untiring care, more con-

stantly studied her unspoken wishes, more zealously striven to ease her heart and amuse her mind. His regard fairly encompassed her. If she remained in her chamber, books, papers, and flowers, were going up in broken detachments all day; if she came down, he rarely failed to meet her at the foot of the stairs and lead her into the back drawing-room, where her own special sofa stood covered with cushions which he never allowed any one but himself to arrange. Then he would take his seat by her, and leave no means untried to make the rare smile and rarer laugh, until Valerie, looking on in wondering surprise, could only murmur half-unconsciously to herself:

"The bravest are the tenderest,
The loving are the daring."

Not that Valerie had overmuch time just now for observing Maurice Darcy, or aught that concerned him. Since her return, Julian had been her shadow, in public as well as private—a shadow whom she found it wellnigh impossible to shake off, and who cost her many an hour of deep and painful disquietude. The end was fast approaching—she saw that! Not much longer could the "pretty fooling" go on, or could she stave off a serious declaration and its consequences; not much longer could she hold at arm's-length the devotion that daily grew in passion and exactitude. An explanation must soon come, and after that—well, perhaps it was part of her punishment that she remembered now her father's warning, and wished vainly and bitterly that she had heeded it. Ah! there is no telling, but perhaps we might not sow quite so recklessly if we would only bear the reaping-time in mind; if we would only remember that there is no question of liking or regret, no alternative of evasion, when that inevitable hour comes, and the relentless scythe is put into our hand. but, whether we will or no, the harvest must be gathered. Even in the merest worldly sense, there is no wiser maxim than that of "Look to the end." Ay, look to the end, for if we often or ever did so, that end might not be so full of ashes and gall when it comes. Slowly and painfully, as all great lessons must be learned, this truth came home to Valerie Aylmer; but the harvest was to be gathered in for all that; nor was it long before the reaping began.

It seemed that Madame Vacquant had laid her plans well, for by degrees Valerie began to perceive that society at large considered the *affaire* between Julian and herself in the light of a recognized engagement. Men fell back from her side when he advanced, as if conceding an acknowledged right; women began to speak of her as of one outside the circle of the disengaged; and a thousand trifling occurrences proved to her that the matter was regarded as finally settled. Perhaps Madame Vacquant would have been wise in this move, if she had not reasoned too much on feminine nature in general, and not enough on Valerie's nature in particular. Some women—many women—are easily influenced by any thing of this kind, and are readily brought to think that when society utters its dictum the matter had best be considered settled; that they have committed themselves past recall, and that it is better to accept the situation than to dare the vague and shadowy consequences of rebellion. But no such woman was this girl, through whose veins beat hot and strong the warm Southern blood, that, in great or small, never yet blenched at a penalty, or regarded a consequence. Therefore, it was not strange that this species of social coercion, instead of retarding, rather gave impetus to the explanation which seemed so near at hand. It seemed near at hand, yet it came at last unexpectedly—as most things do come.

Valerie's indignation had been very much roused by Romney's attempt to claim a privileged right to some favor over the heads of half a dozen other aspirants at a certain ball one night. So when he came, instigated by his mother, to make overtures of peace the next morning, he found his fair mistress in a far from placable mood.

"Yes," she said, after listening to all his ready-made penitence, "that is very fine, but I have heard it rather too often. I should like some substantial proof of regret before issuing another official pardon. No—pray don't interrupt me. I know exactly what you are going to say. I am fully prepared to hear

that I must stand your excuse, and all that sort of thing—but, once for all, I must decline standing your excuse any longer. I should think people could like each other in a reasonable manner, like each other without this continual jealousy; but if not—why, then they had better stop liking one another at all!"

"Ah, lady fair, that may be even beyond your power," Julian answered, with a smile—for he thought her only a little more than usually hard to propitiate. "'Like each other in a reasonable manner?'—why, the very stones could afford to laugh at such a sentiment from *La belle des belles*. When, in all your life, did you ever find any one who liked you in a reasonable manner?"

"I never found any one who liked me in quite such an unreasonable one as yourself," she retorted.

"Granted, with all my heart; for it only goes to prove that none have ever liked you half as well. You surely have not yet to learn that, 'to be wise in love, exceeds man's strength.'"

It was not the first time by many that he had used this word, and used it unrebuked, but now it seemed from some cause or other to jar on Valerie's mood; and her brow contracted as she said, coldly.

"I confess I don't see the point of the quotation. Shakespeare is always right, of course; but we were not discussing either love or wisdom, that I am aware of."

"Were we not?" he replied. "Well, perhaps I am very stupid, but I really thought we were. At least you arraigned me for faults having only that origin and that excuse."

"Having no excuse at all then," said she, with increasing coldness, for she felt out of sorts that day, and very indifferent whether the crisis came or not.

Julian started. Perhaps something in her manner warned him, for he glanced keenly into her face, and his tone greatly subdued itself when he said: "You are in the humor to be hard on me to-day, I see. Well, I deserve every thing that you can say in the way of reproach: but I *don't* deserve suspicion. Blame every thing, doubt every thing—except my love."

He did not mend matters by that; and so he felt, the moment after.

"You forget yourself!" she cried, almost angrily; "and you forget a great deal besides. I cannot and will not listen to any thing more of this kind. Remember that—and don't force me to tell you so again!"

Her tone was more peremptory than she had probably intended it to be, and was ill suited for her purpose, since it woke the angry obstinacy never long sleeping in Romney's nature. He looked at her steadily; and it was easy to see that the look promised no moderation.

"You surely don't think that, after all that has passed, you can lay such a command on me?" he asked.

"I think," she answered concisely, "that it will be your best policy to observe it."

He laughed a little scornfully. "A man who feels as I do cares little for policy and less for penalties. Your worst may be as death to me, but nevertheless I shall dare it. I told you three weeks ago that this should end soon. I tell you to-day that it shall end—now. It remains only for you to say how."

"You had better not force me to say how," she answered, shrinking in spite of herself from the issue, now that it was at hand. "You had better, indeed, forget all of this. Ah, Julian, why will you not be content to let us remain pleasant friends without any of this weary recrimination?"

"Friends?" he repeated; "that is nonsense! I told you once before that I am not, and never will be, your friend. As for this 'weary recrimination,' you are not more tired of it than I am. I have only failed to end it heretofore because—well, because I am the veriest coward alive, and I feared my fate too much. Now, at least, I have a right to sit at your side and look in your eyes—I will forfeit even that if my tale is told to no purpose. For there is no middle ground for me, Valerie. Henceforward, I am either your betrothed husband—or—your bitter enemy."

"Julian!"

She was sincerely startled now—and with good cause. It was no pretty page lisping a love-story, who stood before her,

but a man in whom she had roused all of manhood's strongest passion. At that moment, she would have given any thing to have been able to summon the gay badinage that had fenced off so many an awkward issue; but nothing came to her lips save once again that half-frightened, half-expostulating "Julian!"

For once he paid no attention to her voice. Not a line of his face altered—the face that had suddenly hardened into unaccustomed resolve—and his eyes had lost all their dreamy beauty, as he stood looking down on her.

"Well, which is it?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Julian, you—you frighten me!" she cried. "Which is what!"

"Don't tell me you don't know," he said, passionately. "Don't tell me that at this late day, I have to begin and say to you in due form that I loved you from the moment I saw you first, and shall love you till I die. It is for you to say whether that love shall be God's blessing or the devil's curse!"

"Julian, pray hush!—pray forget this!"

"Forget it!" He gave a short, hard laugh. "It is like a woman to say that. Forget it! As if your sign-manual is ever forgotten! As if I shall not carry your mark, for good or evil, to my dying day! It is a fine thing to draw men on and bid them hope, by every art in your power—then, when they grow too earnest to amuse you, coolly say, 'Forget it.' But have you never thought what that forgetting means?"

She glanced up at him mutely. No, she had never thought—that much, at least, can be said for her. She had never once considered. It was all merely amusement with her; and she had scarcely ever dreamed that it was other with them—until now. No wonder that for once, face to face with the truth, her cheek grew pale.

"Julian," she whispered, "for Heaven's sake, let there be an end of this! I may have been to blame, but see—I ask your pardon so humbly. Indeed, I never dreamed but that you, too, were amusing yourself in a pleasant way. Indeed, I never dreamed—"

She stopped short, for with one quick step he had reached her side and grasped her arm.

"Hush!" he said, sternly "All this is folly, and you ought to know it. Amusing myself! No, you never thought that. You knew only too well that you were playing at life and death with me. But—it is not too late yet. For God's sake, pause! Stop—think! No man on this earth ever loved you half as well as I do—will not even that love win something in return? Have you no woman's heart in your breast? Can you not even tolerate me enough to marry me? I would try so hard, that I would force you to love me after a while. Valerie, I never thought to sink so low! I never thought to say to any woman what I say to you now—Have pity on me!"

Ah, that is right. Veil your face from those beseeching eyes! Shut out from your ears those pleading tones! But you can never banish the voice that says over and over, "Behold your work." And silence in itself is a wrong; so, after a moment, she raised her face, pale and calm, but resolved.

"I dare not deceive you," she said, sadly. "There never has been, there never can be, the least hope for you. I don't defend my conduct toward you—for I suppose you will think it no justification to repeat once more that I had no such intention as this—and if you will not grant me your forgiveness, there is nothing left for me but to bear my burden of self-reproach as best I can. I would like it very much, though, if you could say once—only once—that you forgive me."

She looked at him wistfully; but there was little hope of generosity or pardon in those eyes so full of bitter anger.

"I feel more inclined to curse you, when I think of all that lies before me," he said. "But then one should not violate the *bienséances* so far as that—at least in a lady's presence. No, I shall never forgive you while I live—for you can never even imagine the full breadth and depth of the disappointment you have dealt me this day. Whenever you think of it, only remember this—that I do not blow out my brains, simply because I hope yet to see you suffer in part at least as I am suffering now!"

With those words—words the bitterness of which made her shudder as if a cold hand had been laid upon her—he dropped the

arm which up to that moment he had still lightly held, and left the room without one backward glance.

An hour or two later, there came a knock at Valerie's door, and when she opened it Madame Vacquant stood on the threshold. There was no perceptible change in the perfect discipline of the beautiful features, but the eyes had proved harder to tutor, and in them was a look which might have warned Miss Aylmer of what was coming, if she had needed any warning. The soft voice, however, sounded quite as usual when it said:

"May I come in? I will not occupy you more than a minute, but I have something of importance to say to you."

"Come in, of course," Valerie answered. "I beg pardon for not speaking, but I was not expecting to see you, and—"

"The sight of me surprised you. Very naturally, I am sure. Certainly the last person whom you might reasonably have expected to see was myself. But I hope you will believe that I only come because I feel it my duty to do so."

"Yes," Valerie said, a little stiffly—and then she drew forward a chair, adding, "Will you not sit down?"

The other shook her head. "I shall only remain a moment," she repeated, and she continued standing, one hand resting on the top of a table which occupied the centre of the floor. Of course, Valerie stood also, with her head somewhat haughtily erect, as if yet uncertain what that word "duty"—always an ominous word on the lips of certain people—might portend. Neither was she long left in doubt. Almost without hesitation, Madame Vacquant spoke—clearly and calmly, though somewhat formally:

"I have just left my son. He tells me what I can scarcely believe—that you have rejected him. Witnessing, as I have done, your uniform encouragement of his suit, I have no alternative but to think that he must be mistaken. I cannot but believe that he has interpreted some rebuke or disagreement in a morbid spirit. If you could see him, you would not wonder that I come to ask you who is right—he or I."

Now, long before this, Miss Aylmer was herself again, and not likely to blench before Julian's mother, as she had done to Julian's self. So her answer was made with becoming respect, but very decidedly.

"I am sorry to say, madame, that it is he who is right. He did me the honor to offer me his hand, and I was compelled to decline it. There was no misinterpretation possible, and, much as I regret every thing connected with the matter, I cannot wish that there should be."

It was well that she was so brave, for there was much in the eye steadily regarding her that would not have been pleasant to weak nerves; and through the silvery voice there rang a tone of menace when it spoke again—softening toward the last, however, into appeal:

"Are you in earnest in this? Are you sure that no anger or pique is influencing you, instead of deliberate resolve? Julian's temper is, I know, trying; but I can promise you any concession or submission on his part that you choose to ask. See!—I am his mother, and, for his sake, I am willing to do any thing to secure his happiness. Give me one word of hope to take back to him, and all this shall be forgotten."

"Madame," said Valerie, kindly, "trust me it is you who misinterpret now. And you ask me to do your son a great wrong. I desire neither concession nor submission on his part; and to give him hope would be to deceive him. I cannot do that."

She spoke with profound consideration and gentleness; but, for the first time in her life, she saw passion flash into the face before her, and passion quivered in the tones which answered almost vehemently:

"You mean, then, that you intend to put his love and his life down under your foot? You mean that you have drawn him on by every art in your power only for this heartless triumph? You mean that you fling him out of your path to go to destruction, as he surely will, and that this—*this* decision is final?"

Miss Aylmer drew back, coldly. "We need not argue whether you are right or wrong in your reproaches," she said. "I do not resent them, because you are suffering

through me; but I do repeat that this decision is final."

"That you will not change it?"

"That it is not possible for me to change it."

They looked at each other steadily for a moment. If Madame Vacquant wished to read her chances of failure or success, a very bitter realization of the former must have come over her at sight of the resolution apparent in Valerie's eyes. Certainly when she spoke again, all the late passion and appeal had died out of her voice, and it was now only measured and chill.

"I see, indeed, that I *have* misinterpreted you greatly. For one thing, I fancied myself addressing a woman—not a coquette, without the ordinary impulses of humanity that temper the worst of coquetry. It seemed to me that the part you have played was too pitilessly cruel for belief. And it is hard, very hard, that I should learn my mistake too late. If I had only dreamed of this a little earlier, I might have interfered at any cost. I might have sent Julian away—anywhere! No fate could have been worse than this!"

"I hope and trust that you are mistaken," Valerie said. "This can be only a boy's disappointment. Before long, I will go out of his life, and he will forget me quite."

"You say so because you know nothing of him," his mother answered, with a grand sort of scorn. "How should you, indeed? He has been to you only a toy, and we do not study our toys very deeply. But you are wrong. This has been the sport of a few weeks to you—it will be a lifelong curse to him. Remember this, I beg. Remember. when you go on to act the same story over again, that you have left at least one wrecked life in your path. However, I need speak of him no more; if you have decided, all is said. I should like now to speak of yourself. Has it never occurred to you that, for your own sake, you would do well to pause in this matter, before it is too late?"

Full of astonishment, the dark eyes looked at her. "For my own sake, madame? I confess I don't understand you."

Still less did she understand the cold smile that came round the pale thin lips, or the cold tone that answered:

"If any thing whatever lies very near your heart, pray that you never may understand—that is all."

She turned and walked slowly from the room.

BOOK IV.

CHAPTER I.

SIR ARTEGALL.

It was nearly a month after Romney had put his fate to the touch, and lost it all, that Alix said to Darcy when they chanced to be alone in the library one morning:

"I fancied I saw Mr. Romney's face at one of the club-house windows this morning, as I was coming home from early mass; but I suppose it must have been a mistake. He is not in the city, is he?"

She asked the question carelessly and simply, but was instantly struck with the expression which it brought to Maurice's face. He even hesitated a moment before answering:

"You are sure it was his face? You may have been mistaken."

"No, I am not sure at all," she replied. "But I thought I recognized him, and—and I was glad Valerie was not with me."

"Why?"

"Because he looked so strangely and so badly, that it would have made her feel wretchedly. She suffers very much about him now."

Her companion smiled.

"You are so thoroughly illogical in your sympathy!" he said. "Does it never strike you that Miss Aylmer's sufferings—granting that she does suffer—are hardly so much to be pitied as those she has caused?"

"No," said Alix, stoutly. "On the contrary, it strikes me as far from just to make Valerie accountable for the absurd conduct of a man who chose to fall in love with her and get rejected—as of course we all know Mr. Romney has been."

"But suppose the falling in love was as much her work as the rejection?"

"Indeed, I shall not suppose any thing of the kind."

"Then you must obstinately shut your eyes to the plainest possible state of facts."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have seen a good deal of latter-day flirtation and coquetry in my life; but that I never saw any thing to equal the remorseless science with which your friend led that poor boy on to the end, which every one but himself foresaw."

"I know very little about it," said Alix, with a puzzled look; "for Valerie has never mentioned Mr. Romney's name to me since he went away a month ago. But I can see that she suffers—you could see it too, if you chose to look; and I don't believe that she ever meant any harm to him."

Darcy's lip curled in a sort of cold scorn.

"I have no doubt she told him so," he said; "but we judge deeds rather by result than by intention; that is, even if some of us could imitate your charity with regard to the latter."

"You mean that you think she deliberately broke his heart for mere pastime?"

He looked smilingly into the flushed, indignant face before him. "Why do you want me to say what you are sure to resent?" he asked.

"Because I want to know if you are really so unjust."

"Then I really am so unjust, as you consider it. I hold Miss Aylmer guilty of all that Romney has suffered, and still suffers; simply because she inflicted every pang gratuitously for her own amusement."

"I think I could convince you"—Alix began warmly, when a hand fell lightly on her shoulder, and a clear, quiet voice startled them both by speaking:

"Never waste exertion, *mignonne*. How often must I tell you that? Captain Darcy's mind is thoroughly made up on this point, and you could not change it if you spoke a volume. So I beg you will not speak a word—in my behalf."

Darcy started, and turned. Alix was seated at the table, drawing, and he had been standing by her side sharpening one by one her pencils; so they had neither of them caught Miss Aylmer's soft tread as she crossed the thick carpet; and he was quite unconscious how much or how little of their conversation had been overheard. The doubt did not disquiet him outwardly, however; for there was no sign of confusion in his face when he met her eyes, although, before he could say any thing, she spoke abruptly:

"I am sure you think there was never a better exemplification of the old proverb about listeners; but I ought to apologize. I was reading in that recess yonder when you both came in, and I did not think it necessary to speak. Your conversation was very harmless for a while, you know, and after that—well, perhaps I might have interfered; but then it is not often that one has the opportunity of accompanying a friend, or acquaintance, into the palace of Truth, to hear what is thought of them, as I have done. The temptation must excuse me."

"You have heard every thing, then?"

"Every thing."

"I am glad of that," he said, somewhat to her surprise. "You are aware, then, how I was betrayed into expressing an opinion on a matter which assuredly does not concern me; and about which, consequently, I should not have spoken, if Miss Rivière's questions had not demanded answers."

"Yes, I am perfectly aware of the circumstances, and entirely excuse you," she answered. "Don't fancy that I am either surprised or hurt. I have known all along what your opinion of me was, and I believe you don't change your judgment."

"Not certainly without good cause."

"I never did you the injustice to think so, or to imagine for a moment that the consideration of human weakness or human frailty would weigh a feather's weight in your decision. But perhaps even you may yet live to learn that justice—mere justice—is the most hard, wellnigh the most cruel thing on earth."

To Alix, merely looking on, it was strange to hear the suppressed passion in Valerie's voice, and yet more strange to see how she and Darcy seemed to understand each other—how his face settled sternly at her last words.

"It is all that we need ask," he said.

"God help us then! Yes, God help even you, if, at the last He deal not mercy, but justice!—if, like you, He looks not to intentions, but to results."

"I have never knowingly wronged or pained a creature of His making," he answered, coldly. "I am ready—even for justice."

"So, no doubt, the Pharisee thought, when, standing apart, he thanked God that he was not as other men."

"You are mistaken," he said. "But then, when have you not mistaken me? I have both sins and errors enough to answer for; but I trust they affect only myself. I cannot help thinking that many wrongs done thus, will not count so heavily in the last reckoning, as one wrought against another."

"But how if that wrong was not knowingly wrought?"

He looked at her intently for a moment, and then answered, still coldly:

"I am not a theologian, Miss Aylmer; and that is a question for priests. They will tell you much of 'intention;' but I am a plain man, and I prefer to look at results."

"Yes, so you said before. I should have remembered it."

She had spoken from the first in a low, quiet voice, and now she ceased abruptly. They were all three silent for

a moment, during which they made quite a striking picture—a picture which would not have failed to please Darcy's eye if he could have seen it as an outsider, and might have afforded him a study for some scene far more dramatic than the simple one they were enacting. Perhaps it was the underlying earnestness, which had not escaped in word or tone, that thus unconsciously to themselves asserted itself in attitude; but at least their grouping was singularly expressive. Surprise and concern were shown in every line of Alix's face, as she looked up from the shadow of her capacious chair and heavy mourning draperies; the poor, little pale face that had only its wistful eyes and sun-tinted hair to give it beauty now. But neither of the others heeded her. Tall and straight, Darcy stood by the table, almost as if he had braced himself to resist some danger, or defy some temptation, the knowledge of which hardened the pleasant face, and brought into the genial eyes their look of coldness. He, too, was somewhat in the shade; but Valerie stood farther forward, and on her the whole light of the picture fell —as if it loved to seek out and dwell upon a thing so lovely. The dark oaken panels behind her threw into full relief the richness of tint for which her beauty was so remarkable, from the topmost braid of hair which caught the light on its polished surface, down to the last violet fold of the dress that swept the carpet. She was paler than usual—there was no doubt that the bright cheek had lost much of its color during the last month—but she had never looked more beautiful or more proud. When she spoke again, however, there was only gravity in her voice.

"You did not tell Alix, Captain Darcy—will you please tell me, whether Julian is in the city?"

"Yes," Darcy answered, as gravely as herself. "He is here. He has been here for a week, I believe."

"And why have you not tried to induce him to come home?"

"I should suppose you might be aware that no one is less likely to possess any influence with him than myself."

"Still, you might have tried."

"I did try—without effect."

"And does his mother know this?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"That I cannot tell; but I heard her say yesterday that he was still absent."

"But what is he doing here, that he should adopt this secrecy?"

She asked the question eagerly, almost passionately, but waited vainly for an answer. None came. No sound broke the silence, save the quick, steady strokes with which Darcy was sharpening Alix's pencil. Then, instead of repeating her inquiry, Valerie bent down and whispered a word or two in the latter's ear. Their tenor was at once apparent, for Miss Rivière rose and left the room. While Darcy was still looking after her, Valerie spoke.

"I have sent Alix away, because I wish to speak to you on this subject, more freely than I could before her, for she knows little or nothing of Julian's weakness. I asked you a moment ago what he is doing here, and your silence is answer enough. I ask you now if you will make an effort to bring him back to his senses?"

"I would willingly do so," Darcy answered, "if I could flatter myself that there was the least likelihood of success. But I know that there is not."

"Why?"

She asked this sharply, and he looked up in some surprise.

"I should think you would scarcely need to inquire.'

"Is it my presence that keeps him away?"

"I can only presume so."

She was silent for several minutes, clasping her hands over the back of the chair, and looking down on them with a strangely-set and bitter expression—her brows knitted, and her lips compressed. But when at last she looked up, he saw that she had arrived at some determination.

"Then I will not be here a day longer than I can help," she said. "I will write to papa, and as soon as he can come for me, I shall leave—I hope forever. But, in the mean while, for this will take time, I must do something. You are the last person in the world on whom I have any claim for service, or of whom I would like to ask a

favor. Yet it is part of my hard punishment that I am now forced to ask both service and favor of you."

She paused a moment, and he began to speak, but she interrupted him:

"No. Please don't make any protestations. It would be rather late for those—between *us*. I have no doubt you will do what I ask you without demur or grudging. But it is none the less hard to ask it. In one word, you will deliver a note to Julian, and add your entreaties to mine that he will come home?"

"I will deliver the note certainly," Darcy answered; "but, as for the entreaties, you must allow me to assure you that they will be useless."

"Even mine?"

He looked at her steadily.

"Unless there be something more than entreaty offered, even yours."

"You mean—?"

"I mean that Julian is not likely to return, save as your accepted lover."

The blood rushed over her face in a moment.

"Then he will not return," she said, haughtily. "But—" and her tone changed and softened—"I must do something. I must at least attempt to move him! Surely, Captain Darcy, you do not think it would be utterly useless?"

He certainly did think so, but the eyes that looked at him were so full of pathetic appeal that, for once, something like compassion even for her crept into his heart, and he compromised with the truth.

"It can do no harm," he answered. "That is all I can say."

"That is enough," she answered. She sat down in Alix's vacated seat and drew toward her paper, pen, and ink. It did not take her more than a minute to dash off a few lines and push them toward Darcy, saying, "Will that do?"

"Do you mean me to read it?" he asked, in surprise.

"Yes," she said. "Why not? If I had needed any proof that the whole circumstances of the case were known to you, your strictures of this morning would have given it."

After that, there was nothing for him but to take up the paper and read what she had written. It was only a short appeal to the wayward heart she had cause to know so well—an appeal chiefly to its own generosity, but so well and delicately expressed, avoiding with such fine tact too much and too little allusion to the past, that Darcy was fully justified in his commendation. "This will certainly move him if any thing can," he said, cordially.

She looked up wistfully.

"If any thing can! You say that in a tone of very grave doubt."

"I cannot help feeling very grave doubt," he answered. "He has not—of course I need scarcely say that—mentioned your name to me; but he is very far from being even his usual self."

"How is he changed?"

"Perhaps you can imagine—at least I cannot well describe the change."

"Yes," she said, in a low whisper, "I can imagine." Then she was silent for a moment, until at last, looking up at him, she murmured, "And you too think it is all my work?"

"I acquit you this far," he answered, "that you did not comprehend the inflammable material with which you dealt. No doubt you have often made this experiment with less disastrous results. You were unfortunate in your subject this time, that is all."

"You are mistaken," she said, in a low voice. "But that is where you wrong me so deeply that I suppose I need scarcely attempt a word of justification. I never in all my life made any experiment in the way you mean. I may have been careless and thoughtless sometimes—youth loves pleasure, and woman loves admiration—but I never knowingly injured any one. However, that is not to the point at all. You promise me that you will see Julian, and deliver this note?"

"Yes," he said. "I promise to bring you an answer in the course of a few hours."

"And—may I give you one caution?—Please urge him to return; and do it kindly. Don't be hard on him."

"You think me likely to be so?"

"Yes; you are like most strong people, very intolerant of weakness."

"I hope not—I trust not; for no one is secure from weakness. And I am sorry you think I could possibly be hard on this poor, foolish boy."

"Ah, but I know so well how you despise his folly—all of it. Sir Artegall, I am sure, did not have much sympathy for love-lorn youths."

"And I am Sir Artegall? Well, there have been more odious comparisons. Sir Artegall was brave of heart and strong of arm. For that much I owe you thanks. But he was also captive to a woman's fair face; and that, while Fortune befriends me, I shall never be."

Something of her usual arch spirit flashed into Valerie's eyes as she answered:

"So I fancy Sir Artegall may have said before he saw Radegunde."

Quick as thought came the ready reply: "Then I am wiser than he, for I have seen many Radegundes, and yet dare say it."

This was evidently no idle boast. The eyes that met hers were steady and firm as few eyes had ever been. They said many things, but chiefly that, if *she* had ever flattered herself with any power over this heart of oak, she was even more deceived than deceiving; and, for once, *La belle des belles* laid the knowledge to her soul with strange humility.

"I know what you mean," she said, with a faint, grave smile. "I hope it will do one Radegunde some good to appreciate that her empire is by no means so universal as she once flattered herself it was. And perhaps she respects Sir Artegall all the more for his insensibility. Now I will go and send Alix back to her drawing-lesson. You deserve that reward for being so patient with this tiresome interruption."

He made no effort to detain her as she glided from the room; but only stood where she left him, with an expression strangely set and stern on his face—an expression that did not soften until Alix's sweet voice sounded in his ear, and her brown eyes looked up into his.

"Dear, will I disturb you?" asked Alix, as she entered Valerie's room while the dinner-toilet of the latter was in progress. "But you are going out?"

"Yes," answered Miss Aylmer, who was dressing, with a very overcast face. "I forgot completely that we were engaged to dine at Mrs. Bird's, until Madame Vacquant reminded me of it a few minutes ago. And you see I have to make a toilet in double-quick time now. It is very provoking; for I wanted especially to see Captain Darcy this evening. But then—I am beginning to believe that every thing in life takes a most malicious pleasure in being provoking, and so it hardly matters. Come in, by all means, *petite*, and tell me what it is that has brightened your eyes with something of their old lustre?"

"Good news," Alix answered, "if any news can be counted good now—news, at all events, that I am very grateful for. You know how I have longed to go to Europe?"

"Know!—of course I do."

"Well, it seems that Captain Darcy has a great many friends in Germany, and, through one of them, he has obtained an offer for papa's consideration—an offer of a position in a large banking-house of Leipsic—which will give me all the musical advantages I could not hope to obtain in any other way. Is it not kind—is it not good of him?"

"It is very kind indeed," said Valerie, struck by the thoughtfulness of the service. "And your father, Alix—will he go?"

"That is what I came to tell you. I have just received a short note from him, telling me that he has accepted the offer. So, it is settled—we go."

She said the last words more mournfully than joyfully, and there was so little of exultation or happiness in the face at which her friend turned to look, that Valerie could not help expressing a little incredulity.

"You cannot be in earnest," she cried. "You surely cannot announce such a prospect as that in such a tone! Why, it is enough to take away one's breath! If it is true, I don't know whether to scold or congratulate you! How is it that this is the first I have heard of such an important matter? But I can guess. Captain Darcy bade you keep it secret—even from me."

"So far from that, he only told me about it this morning, saying that he had not done so before, because he was uncertain of papa's consent, and did not care to raise my hopes without some secure foundation. I hardly thought myself that papa would accept; but he has done so."

"And I should have been sure that he would. Why not, indeed? There are men who would give half their lives for an assured independence out of this wretched country. And, as for breaking ties, or leaving friends —I believe those are the usual objections to going abroad—a mightier Hand has already done that for him. He could not stand among the ruins of Thebes more alien from his past life and past hopes than he stands here to-day."

"Yes," she said, sadly; "and so it may be best. While as for me—"

"As for you, there is a glorious vision of Music that beckons you with shining eyes and outstretched arms across the ocean."

She shook her head mournfully. "No. All that is over for me now—and I don't think it will ever return. I am anxious to resume my studies, but it is with none of the old love—rather with a heavy consciousness of toil. I must work; for my future support may depend upon my own exertions. But it is only work. It has ceased to be delight."

"You are not yourself now, Alix; you are morbid in your view of your future as well as of your present life. This will pass away after a time, and the old allegiance will return."

"I scarcely think so," she said, slowly. "A spring seems broken within me. After a while I may learn to take interest and feel pleasure in the art again; but the full glory of its worship can never return. The old love—the old beauty—ah, they are buried in *her* grave!"

Her voice ceased, choked by tears. And although Valerie knew that she was mistaken—although she was sure that her art would soon claim all its former devotion—she could not say so. She could only smooth back the bright hair, and murmur softly the grand old words that have given strength and courage to many a failing heart since they first fell from the inspired pen of that poor monk whom millions upon millions have risen up and declared blessed—"He who best knows how to endure, shall possess the greater peace!"

Then she went back to her toilet; and when it was completed hurried down-stairs without further delay. Pierre was loitering in the lower hall, and she paused a moment to ask if Darcy had yet come in—hoping almost against hope for an affirmative reply—but he answered at once in the negative, and, with a sigh, she went on into the drawing-room. Strange to say, although it was growing quite late, Madame Vacquant was not there. The sumptuous rooms were all ablaze with gas, but profoundly silent, and wholly empty, the chairs and sofas, the tall mirrors and gleaming statues having all the light and warmth and bright luxury to themselves. To and fro Valerie wandered, in restless impatience, anxious to be gone only because waiting was tiresome, and because of a wholly illogical feeling that the sooner they left, the sooner it might be possible to return, yet dreading very much the evening before her. She dreaded every thing now that connected her with Madame Vacquant, and, as society preëminently did this, she had begun to dislike society. As she sauntered aimlessly back and forth, all unheeding the lovely reflection which mirror after mirror gave, she yawned wearily in anticipation of her coming boredom; then she looked at her watch, and wondered how much longer Madame Vacquant would be, and finally she went to the window, drawing back the heavy silken curtains, and looking out on the gathering night and misty rain. Almost unconsciously she shivered, then turned away, and sauntered back toward the music-room. She sat down to the piano, but she had not played six bars before she rose again, and again looked at her watch. Surely it was strange that Madame Vacquant still did not come! Perhaps she was in her sitting-room. It was foolish of her not to have thought of that before, and not to have gone there. She had not often entered this room during the past month, and had been averse to doing so even when it was necessary; but now im-

patience mastered every other feeling, and she turned in that direction. Although forming no part of the reception-suite, this apartment was connected with them. so she had not far to go. She passed hastily through the different rooms, until she came to the one in question. The door was closed, but her hand was on the lock when suddenly a sound fell on her ear that made her pause —the sound of voices speaking.

Not ordinary voices in ordinary conversation. Even through the heavy oaken panels there came, sufficiently audible, the quick tones of impatience, and the deeper accents of anger. The speakers were plainly only two, but they spoke so fast and eagerly that before a minute had elapsed Valerie knew that she stood with only a partition between herself and the man she had rejected—that Julian Romney was with his mother.

He had come home, then! That was the first thought which flashed across her with a feeling of intense relief—relief scarcely tempered by the realization it was no happy or even peaceful interview from which that door separated her. Plainly there was bitter strife of words between the mother and son —none the less bitter because restrained by the former at least within due moderation of speech. Involuntarily, on realizing this, Valerie turned away; but as she did so, Julian raised his voice from its low key, and her own name fell on her ear, coupled with another which made her start in uncontrollable surprise, for it was not the name of the man whom Julian might have been supposed to mention, but of the loyal-hearted lover whom she had left in far Louisiana— not of Maurice Darcy, but of Charles Hautaine!

She had turned away involuntarily; now, involuntarily, she paused, but it was only for a moment. She heard Madame Vacquant utter a few words which were evidently a question; and then, instead of waiting for the answer that would have told her all, she fled swiftly and eagerly—fled as if from some sudden temptation, and never paused until she found herself standing breathless by the same window from which she had gazed in listless impatience so shortly before.

Then she could not avoid asking herself what could be the meaning of this strange knowledge of Hautaine by one to whom she had never uttered his name—nay, more, this strange knowledge of his claim upon her, the claim which the more engrossing interests of these past months had almost swept from her recollection. Now she waked with a start to the remembrance that her word was indeed staring her in the face—that the six months of her promise would finish their course within the next few weeks. She stopped a moment, and put her hand to her head in bewildered surprise. Could it really be so? Had time slipped away so fast, and brought her forward—only for this? She had given her promise to Hautaine in October, and this was the last of March. Yes; in a short time, the bond was due. In a short time, Hautaine might come—and would he not come—to claim his promised answer, his promised reward for long and patient waiting? She knew that he had been in Europe for many months, but—a stir, a fragrance, and Madame Vacquant's silken robes swept into sight.

"So you are down," she said, with a little start. "I am sorry to have kept you waiting; but your grandfather detained me so long from my toilet, and Rose was so stupid about my hair, that I could not help it. Shall we go now?"

"It is quite time," Valerie answered. For her life, she could not have said any thing more with that face fronting her—falsifying, as it were, the testimony of her own ears, and those musical tones still vibrating on the air. At that moment, Pierre announced the carriage, and they went downstairs. In the hall Valerie found time to say a few words to him, which she flattered herself were unheard:

"Tell Captain Darcy that I will be back early, and ask him to wait for me in the library."

Then she hurried after Madame Vacquant, and they were hastily driven away

CHAPTER II.

RADEGUNDE.

THE clock on the library mantel rang out with its clear, silvery voice the single stroke of one, as Maurice Darcy looked up from a letter that he had been writing, with something of impatient surprise on his face.

"So late?" he muttered. "On my word, Miss Aylmer has a very royal faculty of forgetting or ignoring—I suppose it is all the same thing—everybody's convenience but her own. Three hours have I been waiting here, in obedience to her command, and yet there is no sign of arrival—Mrs. Bird's parties are not usually so entertaining either. A different sort of woman would remember—but, pshaw! Of course she has been taught to believe that everybody must submit to her caprice; and so, perhaps, the fault is hardly hers. I might as well give Gaston another sheet, I suppose; by that time she may condescend to enter an appearance."

He drew a fresh sheet toward him as he spoke, dipped pen in ink, and wrote on rapidly thus:

"You ask me what I am doing, and the question is harder to answer than you would at first imagine. I have been painting, of course; but only in a desultory sort of fashion, and to very little effect indeed. Chiefly, I believe, I must bring myself in guilty as 'idler at ease'—and this is a profession the hardships of which we are very apt to undervalue until we have tested them by actual experience. I remember that I used to be incredulous of their existence: but call no man happy till he dies; and from henceforward I take my pity from the hard-working children of toil, to tender it respectfully to the fine gentlemen who are dependent on their own sensations for their amusement in life, and who wear out those sensations, as one wears out the strings of an instrument, by constant use. Plainly, I am wearied to death of this life, and every thing connected with it! My wound troubles me very little now, and my health is almost entirely restored; so I shall soon drop this artificial shell, and resume the old existence in sober earnest in the old *atelier*— By-the-by, have you seen about renting it for me? I should like that special one, if possible, since so many pleasant associations are connected with it, but any that suits you will be sure to suit me. As for further talk of Florence or Rome, I will not listen to it! You are better in Paris than anywhere else, and out of Paris you shall not stir with my consent—least of all, with my connivance. Besides, I honestly prefer it myself. There are many things that unite to make it the most desirable residence in the world, for the poor as well as for the rich, for the struggling as well as for the famous. If I ever succeed in my art, it is in Paris that this success will be worth most. If I were not so entirely a cosmopolitan—one of the Bedouins of civilization—I think I should make my home there in preference to any other spot of earth. But such a supposition is particularly absurd when I am just now possessed with the roving fever worse than ever, and longing for a wider flight than I have taken yet. Do you remember Valdor?—him who served with the Spahis in Algeria, and had a portfolio of sketches that would have done honor to Gavarni? But of course you do, for he was not a man likely to be forgotten. Well, the other day I heard from him. He is down in Mexico, serving in the archduke's —I mean the emperor's—Foreign Legion. He heard of me from some of my old Confederate comrades who are there in force just now, and wrote such a letter! It is Valdor himself!—half made up of calligraphy, half of etching, and quite the most amusing, reckless, devil-may-care production that ever was laughed over. What talent the fellow has, and yet he is nothing, will die nothing! However, this is not to the point. I mentioned him to explain my new fever. He urges me to come to Mexico—promises a plentiful share of blows and honor, a commission certainly, a dukedom probably, and the most glorious scenery in the world! You would laugh if you knew how strongly the whole picture tempts me. I always told you that I am as much soldier as artist —and of late I really begin to think that

the element of soldier predominates. It provokes and yet it amuses me to observe how my colors lack interest to me, and how I long for one more call of bugle or drum. If it were not for you, I think I should lay my palette aside again, take a portfolio under one arm, and a sword under the other, and start for Mexico. But, *diavolo!* I am writing nonsense like a girl; for not all the blows and honor in the world could keep me long from you. I shall sail by the first of next month, at latest, and so, perhaps—"

His hand stopped short in its rapid passage over the paper. His quick ear had caught the crash with which a carriage drew up before the door; the next moment, a quick peal echoed through the quiet house, and then there was a rustling of dresses and murmur of voices in the hall. Good-nights were exchanged, then a light step approached the library, a hand touched the lock, the door opened, and Darcy rose to meet—not Miss Aylmer, but Madame Vacquant.

His surprise must have been manifest in his face, for she laughed a little.

"You here, my dear Maurice?" she said. "I did not expect to find any one up. It is after one o'clock, I see. You must have been pleasantly engaged."

"I have been writing," he answered, with a glance at the letter before him; "not unpleasantly engaged, therefore. But it is you who are late. Surely Mrs. Bird's dinner-party has not detained you until this hour?"

"Oh, no," she answered, carelessly. "After we left, Valerie remembered Mrs. Maitland's reception this evening, and we drove there. We found a very pleasant party, and Mr. Arle engrossed Valerie so much to her satisfaction apparently, that I disliked to disturb them by coming away early. She seems quite tired, however, and has gone to bed. But I am not sleepy at all, so I came in to read for an hour or two. Don't let me disturb you."

"You don't disturb me, for I have finished my letter," he answered, quietly. "I think I shall bid you good-night."

"Good-night," she answered, with a smile. "I would wish you pleasant dreams, only dreams are such very disappointing things—almost as bad in that way, as women, it is said."

"When one has not cherished expectation, one cannot well be disappointed," said Darcy, with his pleasant laugh. "I hope you will have pleasant dreams, and, once more, good-night."

The door closed on him, and he went his way up-stairs, secretly no little puzzled by the word-play just passed. Evidently she knew that he had been expecting Valerie, and that Valerie had seen fit to break the appointment of her own making; but what then? Truly, she also knew Maurice Darcy very little, if she fancied that the disappointment was more to him than mere matter for a smile over this fresh proof of Miss Aylmer's fickle caprice.

He was still smiling that smile to himself, as he passed to his chamber, when, from a corridor on the left, Fanchette advanced and suddenly waylaid him.

"Miss Valerie told me to give you this, sir," she said, presenting a card; "and will you please send an answer by me?"

He looked at the bit of pasteboard. It only held four lines:

"Be kind enough to suspend judgment on my apparent incivility until you see me. Will you be in the library to-morrow morning? If so, I must ask you to wait for me."

He turned the card over, and in the dim light wrote a line or two on the reverse side:

"Of course, I will be at Miss Aylmer's service to-morrow morning. I send the answer to her note—trusting that it may prove favorable."

He took a sealed envelope from his pocket, handed it together with the card to Fanchette, bidding her deliver them to her mistress, and then went his way to his own room.

Darcy did not have long to wait next morning. He went straight to the library after breakfast, and, before many minutes, Valerie followed him. He thought when she came in that she looked rather pale and worn, but neither of them spoke until she had crossed the room to where he stood by the fireplace. Then she asked, quickly·

"Did you wait for me long last night?"

"Not very long," he answered—"not onger than I should probably have waited even if I had not received your message."

"What must you have thought of me!" she said, passionately. "It was bad enough that I, who have no claim upon you, should have made an appointment at all; but to make it and break it—what must you have thought of me!"

"What should I think, excepting that you exercised your feminine privilege of caprice?" he answered, with a smile. "Pray, don't apologize—I know how tired and how little like talking you must have felt after a Bird dinner and a Maitland party."

"But I must apologize, or rather I must explain," she said, hastily. "You evidently don't understand at all. Caprice! you are kind to call it that; but I think it would have been something infinitely worse if I had acted so. I suppose Madame Vacquant told you about the Maitland party—did she also tell you that it was she who persisted in going, though I begged her not to do so; and that she only consented to come away when she found I absolutely would not remain any longer?"

"No," he replied, with a slight arch of the eyebrows. "She certainly did not tell me that."

"Nor how she prevented my seeing you by announcing her own intention of coming here to read? Well, those were my reasons for not appearing: and now you can see how much 'caprice' had to do with them. I should not have troubled you again this morning, if I had not wished to explain this."

"There was really no necessity for explanation," he said; "still I am not sorry you have made it. Only, one thing puzzles me—why Madame Vacquant should have wished to keep you from seeing me."

"It might puzzle me if I had not long ago ceased to wonder at any thing she does," Valerie answered; "and also if I had not been thinking of other things. You saw my note to Julian, and it is only fair that you should see his answer. But first, one question—did you find any thing in mine that was hasty or inconsiderate, any thing that could have given offence?"

"Assuredly not," he answered. "Nothing could have been more kind or considerate. There was not a single expression that could possibly have merited resentment."

Her lip curled—he thought with scorn—and she handed him the envelope he had sent her the night before. "Well, now, look at his answer," she said.

He drew forth the enclosure—simply a sheet of paper torn completely in two. A glance showed him that it was her own note thus sent back to her without one word of comment. For a moment he looked at it incredulously; then Valerie was almost startled by the angry light that flashed into his eyes, and the angry color that rose to his brow.

"Was this all?" he asked.

"That was all," she answered.

"And he made me the bearer of such an insult! Miss Aylmer, I beg you to believe—"

She interrupted him by a gesture of silence. "Pray don't think any assurance of your ignorance necessary," she said. "Of course you knew nothing about it; but what does this prove to you—concerning him?"

"That he is an unmannered churl!" he answered, concisely; "and that he needs a lesson in breeding, which I shall take great pleasure in giving him."

"Indeed, you must do nothing of the kind," she cried, quickly. "I should never forgive myself for my folly in showing you this, if you, of all people, resented it on my behalf."

"You forget the position in which it places me."

"And whose fault is that? Surely mine, since I made you my ambassador. No, Captain Darcy, you must never mention the matter to Julian. Promise me that you will let it rest as if I had not shown you this."

"Let it rest!—why, you surely don't think me absurd enough to be drawn into a quarrel with a foolish, spiteful boy like this?"

"No matter what I think. Promise me that you will not let him know that you are aware of his incivility."

"He deserves—"

"No matter what he deserves. If we

come to deserts, the most of us would fare badly enough. Promise me, I say!"

He looked at her with a smile. Already his brief anger had passed, and he was amused by the imperious command of her tone. "I imagine a great many people must have told you that to hear is to obey," he said.

"You never did, at all events. Come, have I your word of honor that this remains between you and me?"

"If nothing less will satisfy you—yes."

She smiled brightly—so brightly that he saw at once why many people had found living sunshine in her face. "Thank you!" she said, with her pretty, gracious bend of the head. "I am quite satisfied. And now let me tell you something that you may be astonished to hear: Julian was in this house last night."

She lowered her voice in making the statement; but, to her surprise, Darcy heard it quite unmoved.

"Well," he said, quietly, "why should he not be here?"

"Then why should he not stay here?" she asked, impatiently. "Why should there be all this mystery, unless for the purpose of making me uncomfortable?"

"Probably that may be the cause of it," he answered, coolly.

"Was there ever any thing more ungenerous, then?"

"Not often, I grant you. But don't blame Julian more than he deserves. He may not be able to meet you as an ordinary friend."

For answer her eye turned to the torn letter lying on the table between them. He saw the glance, and touched the envelope rather disdainfully with his hand.

"Even this might be accepted as proof of it," he said.

"Yet you did not think so a moment ago."

"Pardon me. I only could not excuse him for ceasing to be a gentleman, because he became a lover."

He spoke very indifferently, but Valerie could not help thinking how little likely it was that he would ever be swayed from his even course by any such vagaries of passion as those they were discussing. She even gave partial utterance to this reflection:

"You are the last man in the world to judge Julian," she said, a little indignantly. "You are as cold as he is mercurial; and you know nothing of the passion which influences him so entirely."

"I am certainly very ignorant of how far common-sense and love are incompatibilities," he answered, carelessly. "Well, have you any further commands for me?"

"Not unless you choose to comfort him with the assurance that before long I hope to be in my dear Louisiana."

"And I in France. So, as we are about to go our different paths, may we not bury the tomahawk, and smoke the pipe of peace together during the few days still remaining of our accidental association?"

"With all my heart," she answered. "Indeed, I am glad to be able to feel that the tomahawk might have been buried and the pipe smoked long ago, with my full consent."

He looked at her in smiling surprise. "Do you mean that it is I who have been accountable for our want of friendly understanding?"

"Yes, I mean exactly that," she answered. "I offered you my friendship when you made your frank explanation that day in the picture-gallery. Do you remember? you thought fit to put it very coldly aside; and I need hardly say that I am not accustomed to making such proffers twice. I see you cannot deny this."

He certainly could not, nor did he make an effort to do so. He looked at her, and said, "Perhaps such conduct was only wisdom."

So little idea had she of any thing like a compliment from him, that she asked simply, "Why?"

"I think you should know why," he answered. "There is said to be no middle ground for those who come near you. Indifference can never soften into liking, and stop short there. Now, I had no mind to go farther. I am very sure you are not satiated with conquest, and there was safety only in distance. You can best tell whether I misjudged you or not; but I fancied at one

time that you would not have been averse to adding even my poor scalp to the many trophies already hanging at your belt!"

He spoke composedly, almost coldly; but Valerie heard him with a dismay and bitterness hardly to be described. Then he had read her so thoroughly as that!—read even her paltry vanity, her poor ambition, her pitiful resolves to attract him! No wonder that he despised her!—no wonder that he wore an armor of mail against all her shafts!—no wonder that they wakened in him only scornful contempt! Mortification tingled through every vein, until her cheeks were burning and her eyes were almost overflowing, before she had found a word to say. At first she lifted her head haughtily enough, but then—was denial possible? She *had* striven to attract him, solely for the gratification of her own vanity; and, even if he would have believed her, she disdained equivocation. Indeed, she had a regal scorn of any thing like pretence, and nobody had ever been able to say of her that she blenched from the consequences of any action. When at last she lifted her eyes to his, they were proud even in their humility.

"You are right," she said; "I did endeavor to attract you—and failed entirely. And—perhaps you may be surprised to hear—I was glad to do so. I should have felt a contempt for you if you had yielded, as so many others have done; but I was glad to learn what I have always believed, that there *are* some men strong enough in heart and head to see how much a coquette's beauty and a coquette's arts are worth. I have liked you honestly and sincerely ever since that day of which I spoke a moment ago; and I liked you all the better, and respected you all the more, when I tried my experiment and failed; when I found that, instead of attracting, I only repelled you. You will think this strange, perhaps. I don't pretend to account for it. I only know that it is so, that I have long been conscious of it. I know what you think of me—how vain, and weak, and cruel, you consider me—but if you ever remember me in the future, let it be with this scant justice, that I am glad *you* at least never suffered a pang through me."

Suddenly and without warning, the quick tones ceased; and turning abruptly, so as to give him no time for answer, she moved toward the door. To her surprise Darcy was there before her, with his hand on the lock.

"One moment, Miss Aylmer," he said.

But Valerie scarcely heard and did not at all heed him. Some strange, wild emotion was tugging at her heart so fiercely that her ungovernable impulse was to rush away with it—anywhere, so that it was out of sight and reach. Sharply, almost angrily, she said:

"Let me pass, if you please."

"Will you not even hear me?"

"No. Let me pass."

But he stood perfectly still, looking down on her with something like a smile of triumph on his face, and his hand still resting upon the lock.

"Nay, then, I must be rude enough to detain you," he said, gently. "Valerie!—look at me. Are you indeed so blind as not to see and know what this is?"

She looked up at him in sudden amazement, but not doubt—never again doubt. Let the future hold what it would for them, they could never again mistake each other. Never again could they unlearn the knowledge read in one another's eyes as they stood face to face in that brief moment. Never again fail to see that this was love. Like a flash it came to one at least, as, with a great gasp, the proud head of *La belle des belles* went down—on Maurice Darcy's shoulder!

All conflict was over. The victor's hand gathered up the reins of power, and there was nothing to be said or done. He asserted a fact, and claimed a right—that was all. Men, many men, had offered themselves to this woman, and pleaded their cause with force and passion; but no man had ever before taken quiet possession of the citadel as of his own unquestioned property; no man had ever closed in a hand-to-hand grapple, and wrested the sword from the fair grasp that had held it so long triumphantly; and perhaps this was the only way in which victory was ever possible.

It was not very long before Valerie rallied, however—not long before she raised her flushed face and shining eyes with a

question that proved how strong the ruling passion was, even in defeat.

"What does Sir Artegall say *now?*"

Then Darcy bent his stately head, even as Sir Artegall may have bent his, before Radegunde's fair face and lifted vizor, while he answered:

"He says that his weapons lie at your feet. He waits his sentence from your lips. Whatever it be, he hopes to bear it bravely, but he prays one favor: speak it quickly!"

It was a favor that she did not grant. On the contrary, she stood looking at him silently and long—the sense of weakness and the sense of power mingled in a manner which would have set a metaphysician frantic, but which is perfectly intelligible to any woman within whose breast there beats a woman's heart. She was conqueror, yet she was conquered! For one long minute she exulted in the consciousness of the first; then the still more delicious realization of the second rushed over her, and she held out her hand, with a proud grace like that of no other woman, saying only:

"Be gentle with your captive."

CHAPTER III.

FETTERS OF ROSES.

"VALERIE, you are dazzling!"

It was Alix who spoke thus in a tone of surprised admiration, as Miss Aylmer entered her room to bid her good-evening before going down to dinner. The little lady was confined to her chamber with a severe cold, and bore her enforced exile on the whole very cheerfully; but she looked up with sincere pleasure on hearing her friend's step outside, and when the door opened she gave vent to this exclamation—and an exclamation so evidently wrung from her by the impulse of the moment, that Valerie started and blushed.

"What is there extraordinary about me?" she asked. "Am I looking better than usual?"

"Very much better," Alix answered. "But—but I really cannot tell what the difference is, though there *is* a difference."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

Miss Aylmer laughed to herself—a soft, happy laugh—and then she went over and looked in the mirror. It showed her a face that was indeed literally transfigured by some bright inner light—a light that would have made even an ugly face beautiful, and that rendered hers, as Alix had said, literally "dazzling!"—a light that shone in every glance of the eyes, and smiled in every curve of the mouth; that lay like a sunbeam on the fair, serene brow, and pervaded every line of the graceful features. Truly the great glorifier, Happiness, had touched her with his magic wand! Truly she might well wear that quiet dress, and relieve her glorious hair by only one knot of bright ribbon; for the woman so adorned needs no aid from art. She is above and beyond it. So long as her eyes shine with that happy lustre, and her lips wear that enchanting smile, she need give no heed to the toilet, for homespun could not lessen, nor satin heighten her charms. So Valerie seemed to feel, for she looked at herself from head to foot, with one radiant and satisfied glance; and then she went over and kissed her enthusiastic admirer.

"I am so sorry you are not well enough to come down," she said. "We shall miss you, especially as we are all alone to-night. It is very likely, too, that Mr. Thornton will make his appearance. You have certainly achieved a serious conquest of that redoubtable critic. He met me on Baltimore Street the other day, and absolutely walked home with me!"

"And can you account for that in no other way than by a serious conquest of mine?"

"Not when it is taken in connection with the fact that he talked of Miss Rivière, and Miss Rivière's voice, without intermission, from French's to the Monument."

"If it depended upon you," said Alix, with a faint laugh, "I think I should soon be an exceedingly dangerous person. You are continually laying some fresh slaughter at my door, and bringing me in guilty of

some new act of malice. What a pity that other people—and especially the reported victims—cannot be induced to see matters in the same light! I might really, after a while— Ah, what exquisite flowers!"

She broke off with this exclamation, as the door opened, and Fanchette appeared, carrying a large bouquet.

"What lovely camellias! what a superb daphne!" Valerie said, eagerly, taking it from the maid. "Whom are they for?"

"I don't know, ma'am," Fanchette answered. "Pierre was in a hurry, and he just told me to bring 'em up-stairs."

"There must be a card," Alix suggested.

And, truly enough, a moment's search resulted in finding one. "L. Howard Thornton," Valerie read triumphantly from one side, while on the reverse was pencilled, "With best wishes for Miss Rivière's speedy recovery."

"Victoria!" she cried, gayly. "A Saul among the prophets! Alix, I congratulate you. These flowers are tokens how completely you have won over for ever and ever the formidable critic of the *Journal*."

"It is very kind of him to remember me," said Alix, receiving the bouquet and blushing like a rose. "The flowers are lovely; and I am very much obliged. Please tell him so, if he comes, Valerie."

"I wish you could tell him so yourself, *petite*. He will lose the blush, and miss the smile dreadfully, when I deliver the message. Now I must go. Enjoy your flowers, and be sure you don't grow lonely."

"No, I shall not be lonely. Besides the flowers, I have that new *Blackwood* which Captain Darcy sent me to-day. Don't forget to give my love to him."

"Ah! that, too, will lose value in the transmission through a third person. Love always does. Good-by."

She flitted from the room, and went down-stairs, singing like a bird, out of the very joyousness of her heart. But, when she opened the drawing-room door, a face rose up before her which hushed the words on her lips in sheer surprise. Certainly the last person she had expected to meet was Romney; and yet, there he was, leaning against the mantel in a well-remembered attitude, with the same stormy face and the same frown that she had seen last. Astonishment caused her to make one pause, then she advanced into the room with outstretched hand.

"Julian!" she cried, eagerly. "What a pleasant surprise! I am very glad to—"

"See you," she would have added, if his manner had not frozen back the unfinished words. But few women would have cared to waste a cordial greeting on any man who met it as Romney met this—with simple repellent coldness. He barely touched the slender fingers held out to him; and his few words of reply were wholly inaudible, while the dark cloud never once lifted from his brow, making it a relief to Valerie to turn round and plunge into conversation with her grandfather; for both M. and Madame Vacquant were present. There was an embarrassed interval of several minutes thus bridged over, before the door opened, and sunshine entered the room in Maurice Darcy's eyes and smile. Almost immediately afterward, dinner was announced.

They went down-stairs in silence, and it is impossible to conjecture how the next hour would have passed, had it not been for Darcy's persevering efforts to make conversation. They were so indefatigable that they deserved the success which they partially achieved. Only partially, however; for Julian's moody face and petulant remarks were not conducive to social ease, and, together with his mother's unusual gravity, so seriously burdened the air, that even M. Vacquant's efforts to talk had an unmistakably forced air, and Valerie was almost totally silent. After a while the two gentlemen drifted into the dreary sea of politics, and remained there until the ceremony of dinner came to an end.

Julian did not reënter the drawing-room, but left the house almost immediately, while Valerie, who had little inclination to remain under Madame Vacquant's eyes, wandered away until she found herself in the conservatory. There she sat down—to wait.

Not long, however. Not long had the fountain risen and fallen in its steady, musical cadence, before there came a sound which banished all the melody of waters from her

ears—the echo of a distant voice, the sound of a nearing tread, the parting of the leafy screens, and, in the mellow light, the grand head and stately figure of her royal-looking free-lance lover.

He saw her in a moment, and came forward, a world of light in his eyes and on his lips, yet his first words were almost of vexation.

"I wish I could have spared you that. Are you weary, *bellissima?*"

She looked up at him, wonderingly.

"Weary! What, that dreadful dinner, do you mean? No, I had almost forgotten it. You see how little power annoyances have over me now."

The last word was almost inaudible, but so significant that the warm blood swept brightly over Darcy's brow. A little while back, and he would have steeled himself into granite against such a tone from her lips; but now—well, had he not surrendered himself to the sweet enchantment, and what was there further needed of cold wisdom and colder self-discipline? And so his murmured tones were full of that poetic folly which is sweeter in the ears of those who love than all the wisdom of all the philosophers who ever rounded periods — from Socrates down. And Valerie listened to him with a wistful, eager look on her face which might have seemed strange, if her next words had not explained it.

"Then, if all this be true, if I am indeed so fair and charming in your eyes, surely your distrust of me must have vanished. Tell me if it be so? Don't be afraid to say no—I only care to hear truth from you."

"Distrust," he repeated, quickly. "What do you mean?"

She looked up at him a little reproachfully.

"If you ask me that, I shall think that you know only too well, and don't wish to answer. Ah, what *can* I mean save the wretched coquetry which held you from me so long? Maurice, tell me—do you still think so badly of me?—do you still distrust me so utterly as you did even a few days ago?"

There was no art in the question, no striving to draw forth protestations or vows, but a strange, earnest pathos and doubt, which gave a yearning inquiry to the eyes lifted to his own, and touched to its very core the heart of the man who loved her. For answer, he only drew her to his side, and, bending down, laid his lips lightly and tenderly on her own.

"There is my reply," he said. "There is my seal on all the past. Let us never speak of it again."

But still she was not content.

"Tell me," she repeated. "Tell me, in so many words, that you trust me—that you believe I never meant wilful harm in the past, and that you are sure I can never mean it in the future."

"I do believe it, and I am sure of it," he answered, proudly. "Do you think I could love you, and doubt you?—do you think I could hold you thus, and distrust you even in the least degree? No"—and it was a very grand scorn that quickened in the deep-gray eyes—"I never practise half-measures. I demand a perfect and entire faith from all who love me. Like Cœur de Lion, I never bade man do what I would not do myself. I do trust you wholly and entirely. And from henceforth there is but one evidence I shall receive against you—the evidence of yourself. Now, are you satisfied?"

Satisfied! Ah, he might have read that in the eyes that looked up at him so warmly and gratefully, in the smile of perfect content that came around the lips, in the tone that murmured softly—

"You have made me so happy!"

He smiled brightly, perhaps again with a shade of triumph, and passed his hand many times caressingly over her rippling hair. He seemed made to woo in a royal fashion of his own—made to gather fresh dignity from a position in which most of his sex grow for the time being pliant and humble. It was next to impossible to imagine him suing for favors instead of taking them, captive instead of captor, conquered instead of conqueror. And yet it was the simplicity about him, the utter absence of all vanity or pretence, which made this, that in another man would have been unutterably revolting, so rarely attractive in him. It was because

Nature had stamped him with such a regal signet, that it was not a bitter sight to see this fair, proud woman—this woman who had long been free and tameless as any wild creature of the forest—own subjection at his hand, and yield herself unreservedly to be rendered happy or miserable by the breath of his lips.

But at least she was happy—perfectly and entirely happy. No one looking on could have doubted that for a moment; and though neither of them knew it, some one did look on. Once, for a minute only, a pale face gleamed on them from between the blossoms of a gorgeous azalea, and then vanished. A woman's dress swept noiselessly over the marble floor, and all was quiet and silence again when Valerie said, gently:

"I have stood in awe of you so long, that I do not think I shall soon learn the perfect love which casteth out fear. I have little doubt that I shall be afraid of you for a good while to come."

"Afraid of me! Then it is I who need to complain of distrust. Afraid of me? When have you ever seen any thing to teach you that?"

"You surely forget how hard and stern you have seemed—especially to my poor failings—many a time."

"And you did not know that I was steeling myself against loving those failings? But the charge may be just enough in some aspects. You would scarcely wonder, either, if you knew the history of my life; if you could know how entirely without softening influences it has been, what a bitter hand-to-hand fight with the world and adverse circumstances, owning but two ties of human kindred, since my mother's death. From different reasons, each of these ties has been the source of sorrow and suffering. A character of suffering, too, which corrodes and hardens a man's nature. Yet even now, I don't think I am ever implacable, save to deception or betrayal—and I have neither deception nor betrayal to dread from your hand. Look up, my love, and tell me if you think I could ever be hard or stern to you?"

She did look up, and met an almost-womanly tenderness of gaze in the eyes bent upon her, an almost womanly gentleness around the lips.

"You certainly don't look very formidable just now," she said, with a soft laugh. "But I feel very much as Una must have felt when she first made the acquaintance of her lion—dreadfully uncertain how long his good behavior will last."

"Ah, but remember that, with all his faults, he was a generous beast," he answered, "and was never known to betray a trust. Then, have you forgotten your talisman? Have you so little reliance on your

> ——'angel-face
> That makes a sunshine in a shady place?'"

She lifted it up, so that the mellow lamplight streamed full upon its fair Southern grace and beauty, while the lustrous eyes looked at him, full of their old archness.

"Very little indeed of the angel in it, I fear," she said; "but, if it makes sunshine for you, I shall think it has found its right use in the world at last."

"If it makes! And do you doubt it?"

"Never at least for lack of will on my part," she answered, with sweet gravity.

And after his answer—the answer of a lover—brief but happy silence settled over them.

It was broken at last by Darcy, who had not overmuch of the Romeo in his composition, and whose mind had already left the "sweet nothings" of courtship, to consider its practical issues.

"*Douce amie*," he said, in his frank, straightforward way, "our happiness must not make us forget our obligations to others. Have I your permission to write to your father to-night, and to announce our engagement to my uncle in the morning?"

He put the question simply, and in a matter-of-course tone—as little prepared for any thing like denial as for the manner in which that denial came. But those two names were gall and wormwood to Valerie, since, alas for our poor heroine! the bitter drop in her cup of rapture was the recollection that she had fallen into the snare of the obnoxious "arrangement;" that she was on the eve of being forced to recant every

declaration she had ever made concerning it, and to give the most signal triumph to her father and grandfather. So, when Darcy spoke thus, she started; then a cloud swept over her sunny face, and she answered, almost petulantly:

"No. I will not give you permission to do any thing of the kind. The present state of affairs is very pleasant—why should you wish to change it? Why wish to usher in all the disagreeables of a public engagement?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Simply because it is the only right and honorable thing to do," he answered.

"Right and honorable!" repeated Valerie, with a light laugh. "Those are very grand words, *mon ami*—too grand by half, considering that we know as well now as we can know hereafter that everybody concerned will be only too pleased."

"Will they?" he said. "Then there is so much the more reason for owing them an immediate announcement."

"Ah, grant me grace," she cried, pleadingly. "I love my freedom so dearly, and —and I dread so much to give it up."

"You count it still your own, then?"

Half-earnestly, half-jestingly, he asked the question; and she looked up with the proud humility he had seen in her once before.

"No," she said, softly, "It is not my own. But my fetters are of roses now; and I dread lest they become links of steel. And I also dread lest I chafe against them then. Let me grow accustomed to captivity. Maurice, a few days—only a few days—cannot matter about making this announcement."

She looked up imploringly—she, ever accustomed to command—but although he left a tender caress upon the lips that spoke his name so sweetly, it was plain that he had no thought of yielding—it was plain that this request was to him only a child's caprice, to be humored and treated gently, but not indulged.

"*Mignonne*," he said, kindly, "a few days can matter a great deal. We are in a false position as long as this continues—a false position to those whose right it is to know our future as soon as we know it ourselves. It is not so much that secrecy in this case would be wrong, as that the principle of secrecy is wrong."

At another time she might have admired, as she had often admired before, the open, chivalric spirit that spoke here as it spoke in every thought and action of his life; the clear, brave stroke that cleft in two any difficulty, and the frank gaze that never even seemed to see any path save the one straight avenue of honor. But now it clashed with her own desire—a desire grown stronger by the opposition it had met—and she felt almost impatient of his punctilio as she answered:

"You ought to remember that we are not in the Old World; and that matters of this sort are not conducted here with any of the stately decorum and disagreeable publicity which attend them there."

"Surely decorum cannot be objectionable," he said. "And publicity, it seems to me, only becomes so when engagement is regarded as a convenient cloak for coquetry."

Valerie flushed hotly. Perhaps conscience had something to say on this score —at least she drew herself back from his embrace, and there was a ring of defiance in her voice as she asked—

"What do you mean?"

"What should I mean excepting what I have said?" he answered, quietly. "You must certainly see that I am right. There would be much less of disgraceful flirtation in this particular, if engagement were here esteemed the public and binding contract which older states of society consider it. However, that is a question for moralists, not for me. The point now is, that I should think poorly indeed of any woman who entered into a secret engagement, and that I cannot consent to see you fill such a position, even for a few days."

"Yet I think you might remember that my wishes are entitled to some regard," she said, half haughtily.

"Entitled to every regard," he answered, so gently that she felt instantly ashamed of herself. "But surely you must admit that I am in the right."

"No," she replied, perversely. "I do not admit that. But, even granting that you are, it is a trifling concession to make to me —as well as the first."

There was a pause. They had each momently grown more earnest, until now the strife of adverse wills had reached its point of issue. With a start, Darcy recognized this; with a start, he saw that Valerie's obstinacy and pride were enlisted against him. Something in her face—in the flushed cheek and compressed lip, reminded him, too, of the day when she had persisted in driving the thorough-breds; and he thought to himself—as men of his stamp are always ready to think—that such a wilful, impetuous nature stood in strong need of the steady curb of authority. It was in his hand now, this curb, and should he neglect to use it? Truly he had not a thought of doing so. And yet, that last tone was very hard to resist. He rather evaded the direct question, when after a moment he said, gravely:

"Valerie, tell me frankly, why you are so anxious for this."

"I thought I had already told you," she answered—feeling herself blush in her own despite—"of what do you suspect me? Do you think I want to use this engagement as a convenient cloak for coquetry?"

"I answered that question when I told you that I trusted you," he said. "No, I do not suspect you of any thing excepting caprice—caprice that is scarcely worthy of you, though. I have already told you why I wish to make this announcement at once—it is a mark of respect due to our friends—and the same reason must plead my excuse for disregarding your first request."

She looked at him steadily.

"You mean that you do intend to disregard it?"

He answered as quietly but as firmly as ever: "What else can I mean, when I say that I think it is right?"

There was silence for several minutes. The fountain filled up the pause with its fairy-like music; and Darcy never knew what a fierce fight was meanwhile waged in the heart of this woman, who had never before known any one bold enough or strong enough to say her nay. It was a good thing that she had little of the pettiness of her sex about her; that in her nature—spoiled though it had been—there were many noble and generous depths; and that, above all, there was a capability of self-surrender and self-conquest only possible to the mould which, however warped it may have become, is still the heroic. Some women would have taken refuge in pettish anger, others would have hardened into obstinate defiance, others again would have provoked still further the useless strife, but she did none of these things. She fought down her own struggling heart in silence, then looked up calmly and gravely, making no pretence of evading her defeat, but accepting it with a dignity that redeemed it from the character of defeat.

"Let it be as you think best," she said, holding out her hand. "I too can trust. Only remember this thing, when I seem to you passionate and obstinate—in all my life, I have never given up my will before."

He made no vow that she should never need to give it up again, for he knew better. He accepted the sacrifice as freely as it was offered, and there was a very stately chivalry in the air with which he raised her hand to his lips, and the tone in which he answered:

"And remember this of me—that I would sooner die than ask any thing of you for my own advantage or to your injury."

And so the light cloud parted and fled away, the broad sunlight came back, and what wonder that they basked in it to their hearts' content? What wonder that they let all points of past or future dispute rest untouched, and only dwelt on the present, only read over the opening chapter of that old romance whose first pages are ever so fair and tender, only whispered the old vows, and glided down the smooth stream, with siren strains echoing in their ears—strains so sweet that they effectually deadened that dull, ominous roar of breakers ahead?

Yet, when Valerie stood before her mirror that night and looked at her radiant face, shining like a star out of the heavy

masses of her unbound hair, a sudden, sharp pang seized her heart.

"He talks of secret engagements, and of convenient cloaks for coquetry," she murmured. "What would he say, if he knew about Charley? What will he say when he does know? I ought to have told him to-night; but—I dared not. I am a coward, I know; but I dread so unutterably what he will think of me! I must not keep his love on false pretences, however. I must tell him—I *will* tell him to-morrow."

To-morrow! How often we say that, when a resolution is taken, or a purpose designed, and how mockingly Fate laughs back at us! To-morrow! As if time was in our poor mortal hands, or as if, to the cowardly and procrastinating, there ever *is* a morrow! As if that word alone has not been the bane of more good intentions, and the death-knell of more noble actions, as if it does not stand for more harm, and ill, and suffering, than any other common to the lips of man! Yet dream on, Valerie!—quiet your conscience with that cunning salve, call back the sunny smile to your lip, and, as you sink off to sleep, murmur again, "I will tell him to-morrow." You mean what you say—you intend it honestly and sincerely, for it is not in you to intend otherwise; but many before you have waked to the bitter knowledge that, in a world of deeds, acts resolved can never stand for acts executed; and that, while you whisper to yourself, "To-morrow," one of the veiled sisters grimly answers:

"But will that to-morrow ever be?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE FORFEIT PLEDGE.

"I HAVE been waiting for you some time, Valerie," said M. Vacquant, a little impatiently, as his granddaughter made her rather late appearance the next morning. "When you have breakfasted, I want to see Maurice and yourself in the library."

He left the room abruptly, scarcely waiting for her surprised assent; and then she turned to Darcy, who was quite alone in possession of the breakfast-table.

"So you have told him already!" she said, reproachfully. "But why does he want me?"

Maurice shook his head smilingly. "I have not told him," he answered; "and whatever he wants with you must necessarily be quite apart from the matter which it has pleased you to make a secret."

"What is it, then?"

"I cannot even conjecture."

"Very singular," said Miss Aylmer; but she said it composedly, and sat down quietly to her breakfast. Whatever M. Vacquant wanted was certainly not to be compared in importance to her cup of coffee, or to the admiring eyes that told her over and over again how lovely she looked. Perhaps the task of telling her so would not have fallen entirely upon the eyes, expressive though they were, if that obtuse Gilbert had not stood so steadily upon guard with a salver under his arm. But, as it was, Darcy had to content himself with reading aloud the telegrams from the *Gazette*, while Valerie trifled with a roll, and talked politics in a tone that redeemed even politics from dryness.

The telegrams and politics could not last forever, though; and after a while she said, with a sigh of resignation, "I suppose we must go to grandpapa now."

"Yes," Darcy answered; and, pushing back the paper, he came round the table and offered her his arm. She took it half laughingly—no thought coming to her of how once before, in that very place, she had accepted Julian Romney's—and then they proceeded out of the room, crossed the hall, and entered the library.

M. Vacquant was already there—was already settled in his own chair beside the cabinet where his letters were always written—the chair, the purple-velvet lining of which brought out with the clearness of an ancient cameo his fine, regular outline of face and crest of silver curls. He nodded kindly but gravely as the two came in, and motioned them to sit down. Then, while they did so, he opened a drawer at his side,

drew forth a folded paper, and held it in his hand when he turned round again.

"*Mes enfants*," he said, in his stately, courteous way, "I have summoned you in this formal manner because I consider it right that you should be informed together, and not apart, of my final intentions toward you. In the order of Nature, I cannot expect to live much longer, and the conflicting claims of you two have been the cause of much uneasiness and the subject of much thought to me. At last, however, I have arrived at a decision; and I am anxious to explain my reasons for it, since it may seem to you—to one of you, at least—not only capricious, but unjust. Valerie, you have been reared so entirely as my heiress, that a bequeathment which gives to you only a share of the inheritance, may seem to you like a wrong. Therefore—"

"Grandpapa," Valerie interposed, reproachfully, "I hope you would have spared me this. I hoped you would believe that I am willing, even anxious, for you to make that disposition of your property which seems to you best."

"I do believe you, *petite*," he said, kindly. "I am sure those are your sentiments now. But there are others who would neither think nor feel as you do, and who, as time went on, might persuade you that you had been hardly dealt with."

"If you mean papa or Eugene—" began Miss Aylmer, a little indignantly; but she was cut short very summarily.

"Chut!" said the old Frenchman, in his French fashion. "Of course I don't mean either of them. Your father does not value money more than most men of the world do; and, as for your brother, unless he has changed very much, he values it considerably less than is either wise or expedient. I was thinking principally of your future husband—for I suppose you will find one some day."

Valerie smiled saucily. "Most people do, grandpapa. But you may be sure of one thing—he will not quarrel with your testamentary arrangements."

'Who can foretell that, *petite?*" said he. "And there is no doubt of one thing—the fact of your having been taught to expect this inheritance would render a different disposition of it an undoubted wrong on my part, if I had not sufficient reason for what I do."

His granddaughter bent forward, and laid her hand over the one which rested on the arm of his chair.

"I am sure of it, grandpapa," she said, gently; "and, once for all, trust me that I shall be perfectly content with that disposition, whatever it may be."

He smiled slightly, gratefully it seemed, and then retained her hand, holding it in his own, and smoothing it down with a tender sort of caress, while he turned to Darcy and spoke abruptly:

"Maurice, you have been so immovable in your resolution to accept nothing from me, that I am forced to urge upon you the last appeal which one generous mind can make to another. Do not deny me the poor satisfaction of making all the atonement possible for a sin which I have bitterly repented—that of making reparation to you for the wrong I did your mother. That wrong was deeper than you or any one else ever supposed."

Darcy started, and his face hardened suddenly and strangely, as Valerie had often noticed; it was apt to harden at any mention of his mother's name.

"That plea had best be left untouched, sir," he said, coldly. "I fear that, if you persist in urging it, I shall only prove that I have not a 'generous mind.' I do not admit that you possess any right or any power of reparation for her wrongs, and I would rather not speak of them under this roof."

"You mean that you cannot forgive them?"

"I mean that I cannot forget how she died, in want and privation, while her fortune was withheld from her."

The elder man did not shrink as this answer fell on his ear. Perhaps his own conscience had uttered it too often for human lips to give the words added force. He only looked up with an unconscious pathos which touched his granddaughter to the quick, and made her turn one keenly-reproachful glance on Darcy.

"You are right," he said. "Even more

right than you think. I have always meant to tell you the story, and you might as well hear it now. It is not very long. You know already how entirely your mother was left in my power by our father's will; how, according to that will, all her property reverted to me if she married without my consent; you know also how bitterly I opposed her marriage with your father; how, when she persisted in marrying him, I carried into effect the condition of the will; how, from the hour in which she took the name of Darcy, I refused to see or hold any communication with her. But you do not know, nor did she or any one else, save myself, that this stern condition was only intended by my father to guard against a danger to which he considered women especially liable—the danger of ill-advised marriage. He thought he might thus prevent Aimée from throwing herself away; but he never intended that, even in such a case, her inheritance should really be forfeited. It was a species of secret trust; and the last thing he said to me before he died was, 'Deal gently with your sister.'"

He stopped abruptly at this point—evidently more from agitation than because he desired any comment or reply—so, for a moment, all was silence in the room. Valerie heard his quick breathing, as he strove to regain composure; but she could not see his face, partly because of her own position, partly because he sat with his back to the light. But that light shone full on Darcy's face, and it was not a pleasant or encouraging sight to either gazer. All the genial expression had faded from it; the clear eyes looked cold and dark; the frank features set and stern; while over the whole there brooded less of anger than of chill, hard severity. Valerie looked at him apprehensively, almost imploringly, but he scarcely seemed to see her; he scarcely seemed conscious of the dread which was upon her. It was a relief when at last M. Vacquant resumed, still steadily and gravely addressing himself to Maurice:

"It is only due to myself that I should assure you that the love of money did not influence me in the course which I pursued. I disliked your father from the first, and I never forgave your mother many bitter and scornful things which she said to me before she left my house. Concerning the first, he was your father, and he has gone before me to the bar of a higher judgment, so I need say nothing as to the grounds of my dislike, save that they afforded me good cause for opposing the marriage, as even you may be aware, from your knowledge of his character. He was the most reckless, the most incorrigible spendthrift I ever knew—though not a fortune-hunter, as in my anger I called him at the time. Perhaps this charge incensed your mother more than any thing else. At all events, it rendered her more obstinate than ever; and she married him. I was very hot and passionate in those days. I vowed to make both of them feel the weight of my anger; and, to do so, I violated the trust of the dead."

Another silent pause—a pause in which Valerie looked again wistfully at the unmoved face before her—and then the speaker once more went on:

"I have forced myself to this painful statement for two reasons: first, because I want to prove to you, Valerie, that if I do not make you the great heiress you once expected to be, it is only by the interposition of something which is at once a reparation and a duty; and, secondly, I wish to convince you, Maurice, that you accept not my bounty, but your mother's right."

He looked at Darcy, as he spoke, with a deprecating entreaty that was as painful as it was strange. It must have touched the younger man, for his face softened somewhat, and his voice sounded more gentle than Valerie had dared to hope it would, when he answered:

"The past is past, sir. Surely we need not dig from its ashes the bitter and painful memories that still remain there. I have not forgotten my mother's last words, which charged me to forgive you; and that I break your bread, is proof enough of my having done so. We need not dwell on the nature of her wrongs. It is too late now to do her justice; and your present duty is not to me, but to those who possess the nearest claim on you."

"It is to you," said M. Vacquant, almost

sternly. "You talk of forgiveness, and yet wish to send me down to the grave with the burden of an unexpiated sin upon my conscience—a sin that has outlawed me from God and His Church these many years? Hush! hush!" he uplifted his hand, as Darcy strove to speak. "I will not hear another word. Talk as you will—refuse what you will—after I am dead. Nothing shall induce me to alter one line of this paper which I hold here—my will."

His will! They both looked at it with something of awe; that paper concerning which there had been so much of conjecture and more of scheming than either of them dreamed; that gave away into other hands the wealth for which its owner had so sinned and suffered; that would deal a death-blow to so many hopes, and gratify scarcely any! Ah! surely that must be a bitter hour to a man who has loved the world, and the possessions of the world, when he comes at last to say, "I do hereby give and bequeath;" when absolutely and irrevocably he bestows upon others all that has been the delight of earth to him, and goes forth naked and stripped, as the poorest pauper, to face the everlasting justice of God! Meanwhile, M. Vacquant slowly unfolded the large sheet which he held, and taking up his gold eye-glass began to read aloud. The will was by no means a long document, and, shorn of all its legal technicalities, might have been briefly stated thus:

First came the minor bequests; old servants were pensioned off, and old friends remembered. Then—

To his wife, Marian Vacquant, in token of "affectionate regard," the interest of one hundred thousand dollars, and the use of the town-house during her natural life.

To his son-in-law, Gerald Aylmer, the sum of one hundred thousand dollars.

To his step-son, Julian Romney, the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars.

To his young friend and connection, Eugene Aylmer, the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars.

The large bulk of the fortune (eight hundred thousand dollars, clear of all bequests) was left jointly to his granddaughter, Valerie Aylmer, and his nephew, Maurice Darcy, on condition of their marrying each other—in case of either refusing to do so, Valerie Aylmer inherited three hundred thousand dollars, and Maurice Darcy the half million remaining.

To the reading of this document ensued a profound silence. Considered from her point of view, it was not Valerie Aylmer's place to speak—besides, she had already signified her assent to any thing; and Darcy also held his peace; so, after waiting some little time, M. Vacquant was the first to break the silence.

"I am afraid that this compromise, like most compromises, has only succeeded in pleasing nobody; but I hope you both comprehend, and do justice to my reasons for making it. I have no hope that you will either of you accept the condition which would render my double duty so plain, but I thought it right to afford you the option of doing so. I hope and believe—"

But what he hoped and believed was left to conjecture; for, as he paused, with a somewhat troubled look, Darcy rose, and came forward to Valerie's side. He took her hand, and then spoke with an air of very quiet and self-possessed deference.

"Sir," he said, "you may be glad to hear that we have anticipated your kind intention toward us; that once more a Darcy sues for the hand of the daughter of your house; and that he needs only your consent to call it his own."

M. Vacquant started, and, for the space of at least a minute, gazed at them—at his granddaughter's blushing face and his nephew's proud dignity—in mute amazement. Then he said, slowly—

"*Mes enfants*, is this true?"

"It is perfectly true," Maurice answered, gravely. "Henceforth, there will be no need of compromise or division, for any interests of ours."

Another minute M. Vacquant was silent—striving perhaps to realize this unexpected stroke of Fortune—but at last he said solemnly:

"Maurice Darcy, I owe your father's memory a great debt. Pray for me that

this may be received as some small payment of it, and—God bless you both, my dears!"

Ten minutes after that, Valerie had left her grandfather and Darcy together in the library, and was walking toward Alix's room with a very sunny smile on her face, when, at a turn of the corridor, she suddenly encountered Romney. Remembering his repulse of the night before, she was about to pass him with a single bend of the head, but he paused before her, and held out his hand.

"Forgive me," he said, "and—tell me so."

"I have nothing to forgive," she answered cordially. "But I am very glad to see you back again; and I hope you mean to remain now."

"You hope so?"

"Indeed I do, most sincerely."

"Without thinking what it would cost me, or without caring—which?"

"Hoping that, after a very little while, it would not cost you any thing," she said, determined not to heed his tone. "Ah, Julian, we shall part soon, never perhaps to meet again—can we not be friends?"

Some violent reply seemed to tremble on his lip, but he controlled it; and, after a moment, answered quietly, with only a quick gleam in his eyes:

"I told you once that we could never be friends. But the last month has taught me that I can be any thing save your enemy, do any thing save remain away from you. If you will promise to teach me friendship half as well as you taught me love, I might, after all, prove an apt pupil."

"You will try at least?"

"Yes, I will try—as others have tried in the past. But perhaps my success may prove as indifferent as theirs."

She looked at him in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, "what I should not have forgotten—only you make me forget every thing—that one of these 'friends' is down-stairs waiting for you now. I intercepted Pierre with his card, and here it is."

He gave it to her, watching with a smile, which it was well she did not see, her growing paleness, as she read on the bit of cardboard the familiar autograph "Charles Vernon Hautaine."

For a moment, a dark mist came over her sight, and a choking sensation rose up in her throat. The impulse of physical cowardice rushed over her, as it had never done before in all her life; and if it had not been for the gaze fixed on her—the gaze whose malice she instinctively felt—she would have fled away anywhere, for a little respite, a little time to consider what was best to be done. But it was no part of Julian's policy to allow that; and his voice broke now on her ear.

"The absent are said to be always wrong—I shall certainly begin to believe that they are always unwelcome, if you give your friend's card no warmer glance than that. What is the matter?"

Valerie raised her head haughtily. The tone was even more significant than the glance, and both together acted on her like a restorative. Whatever she felt, whatever she feared, this man should see neither. So she looked at him, as she answered, very coldly and nonchalantly:

"You are mistaken. The absent are never either wrong or unwelcome with me—especially such a dear old friend as Mr. Hautaine. If I hesitated over his card, it was simply because I was very much surprised. I did not know he was in Baltimore. I must go down to him at once. Will you please let me pass?"

He moved aside at once; but continued to stand at the head of the stairs, watching her as she descended, watching her as she swept in her soft violet draperies across the hall, watching her as she opened the drawing-room door, watching the panel even after it had closed upon her, with the same smile on his face.

He was still standing there, when a hand was laid gently on his arm, and his mother's voice spoke:

"Has she gone down?"

He did not look round, but the smile faded from his face, and its quick, stormy frown came over it, as he answered:

"Yes, she has gone down, to play off her fooleries on that poor devil. Your work will be done, if you will only find an excuse for sending the new lover in upon them about a quarter of an hour hence. He may be so far gone he won't mind any thing of the sort —curse him!—but if he *does* care, she can't make matters straight—granting they told even half the truth about this affair down in Louisiana."

With that he turned and descended the staircase, passing with a scowl by the drawing-room, and out of the front door into the street.

Meanwhile Valerie had gone down armed with the courage of desperation, shrinking in spirit like the veriest coward, but outwardly perfect in bravery and composure, as she moved forward under Julian's eye; even when she put her hand on the lock of the drawing-room door, when she opened it, when she stood within the threshold, when there came eagerly hastening to meet her the same impetuous, handsome cavalier, with hazel eyes and sunny curls, from whom she had parted six months before. He was so entirely himself, so wholly unchanged in look or manner, that, for the moment, all her fear and embarrassment fled away, and she saw only the intimate companion of years; the boy-lover with whom she had flirted and quarrelled ever since they were children together; the man whose brave, bright, generous nature had always possessed such a rare attraction for her, whom she liked to the very boundary of love, and who brought all the breath of home, all the soft skies and golden days with him, in the first tone of his frank, clear voice, the first grasp of his loyal, gallant hand.

Their greeting was every thing that the greeting of such old friends had a right to be, and then Valerie swept into oblivion the awkward issues of the awkward present, and looked at her slave with much of the old arch smile.

"*Merci!* how much you are improved!" she cried. "Is it Paris that has made you so irresistibly handsome?"

"Paris!" he repeated, as he tossed back, with a well-remembered gesture, the graceful curls which many fair ladies had secretly envied him. "I flatter myself that even Paris could not improve me! The thing is, *belle amie*, that you had forgotten how good-looking I am."

"At least I had not forgotten how impudent you are," she rejoined, laughingly. "It is certainly out of the power of Paris, or 'anywhere else, for that matter, to improve you in self-conceit. Come, sit down, and tell me all about yourself and your travels. Do you know I heard that you had gone to Constantinople, to enlist in the Turkish army?"

"You might have heard many more improbable things," he answered, taking a seat beside her own. "I am a sworn free companion now, and there is no telling where I may find myself some day. You know my motto:

> 'La guerre est ma patrie,
> Mon harnois ma maison,
> Et en toute saison
> Combattre c'est ma vie!'"

"In that case, I don't see what brought you back to America," said his listener, with a shrug. "There is no field for such a creed here—a creed, *en passant*, which merits and receives my full approbation."

"You wonder—Valerie, *you?*"

As may be imagined, the tone of this question warned *La belle des belles* that she had ventured on dangerous ground. She smiled—then frowned—then blushed, and finally changed the subject abruptly, by asking "if he had seen Eugene in France?"

Perhaps Hautaine was not overmuch pleased by this transition; but at least he submitted to it with a good grace. He answered in the affirmative, and went on to describe various particulars concerning young Aylmer, who was one of a corps of civil engineers engaged in surveying a railroad in the south of France. He assured the somewhat incredulous sister that the young Confederate accepted his changed position with very perfect philosophy, laughed repining to the winds, with the gay fortitude of his light-hearted race, professed to prefer civil engineering to the kindred military science which had been his profession, and to find surveying railroads more agreeable than planning fortifications. Then he told her

something of his social triumphs, how the fair Parisiennes called him *Le beau Confédéré*, how much he had improved in coolness of head and steadiness of purpose, and how many friends were ready and willing to sound his praises, even in the strange land where he had gone with only a brave heart and a strong arm to aid him in the fight for fortune.

Valerie looked up with kindling eyes. "You can't tell how glad I am to know this!" she said. "My poor, gallant boy! I was almost the only one who encouraged him to cast his fortunes abroad, and who bade him God-speed when he went. So I feel as if half the responsibility of his success or failure rested on me. Papa only half agreed, and Gerald was bitterly opposed to any thing so far out of the ordinary routine of planting cotton or practising law."

Hautaine laughed.

"Gerald certainly will never swell the ranks of *condottieri*," he said.

"No," Valerie answered, with something like a curl of her lip. "Gerald was made for his own groove; and I don't know what would become of him if he was taken out of it. He was born to be a planter at Aylmers, and a planter at Aylmers he is still determined to be, although every thing that made the life pleasant has forever passed away. He is a good specimen of a certain class of the men of the day—the advocates of expediency—who are ready to make the best of any thing, even of their country's dishonor."

"Yes," said Hautaine, absently; for he had not come all the distance which lies between Paris and Baltimore, to talk over this oft-discussed subject. "But then," he added, suddenly, "Gerald may be right, after all—who knows? Sometimes I feel terribly uncertain whether I may not be in the wrong path — whether there is not a duty to one's country when she is down, as well as when she is up; whether—"

He stopped short, for Valerie was looking at him in grieved surprise.

"*Et tu, Brute!*" she said, reproachfully. "I never expected to hear such sophistry, and—if you will pardon the word —such cant, from your lips, Charley. Wrong! wrong to consult your own self-respect, after having done all for your country that an honest man could do!—after having fought for her to the last gasp, and gone with her down into the depths of humiliation and despair!—wrong to fly from her shame, though you shared her suffering! Tell me this—what could you do for her if you remained? As she is, how can the bravest heart that ever breathed, the stoutest arm that ever dealt blow, help her in her bitter servitude? And how can you even help yourself? What path of manly enterprise is there which you do not need to enter with a lie on your lip, and at the door of which you do not leave all the honor of rectitude that is half-religion to the men of our race? True, you might abjure all public paths—you might stay here and eat out your heart in obscurity, a constant witness of all the treachery and corruption that is rampant; but would *that* help the poor *patrie?* No, Charley, no! Go and save yourself from all that must be learned in such an atmosphere! Go with a true heart, and a clear conscience—for I cannot do you the injustice to doubt one thing—when your country needs you, you will be at her call."

He looked up at her with a gaze of honest admiration. For a moment she had forgotten every thing save the sore wound which still bled in her inmost heart, as it bleeds and will ever bleed in that of every woman of her race. For a moment the same old fire leaped into her eyes that had quickened them when she spoke brave words of cheer to the gallant hearts that had gathered under the Red-Cross banner, and, for a moment, something of the old ringing eloquence rushed to her lips, which in those days had shamed even cowards while they listened to her. She looked like an inspired sibyl, as she uttered her last "Go," and he who listened was only too ready to heed the oracle.

"You are right," he said, quickly. "Indeed, I never doubt or hesitate, excepting in some moments of depression and discouragement, when I do not see my way very clearly; for I have not an available profession that can be turned to civil use, like that of Eugene."

"Are you tired of the sea?"

"Yes," he said, with a sudden shadow falling over his face. "Besides, I could only turn pirate, or enter some merchant-service—and both of those paths are liable to objections. I think I shall turn my ambition in a military direction. Austria has always given a cordial welcome to soldiers of fortune. I have a strong inclination to go there. Tell me what you think of it?"

"I think very well of it," she answered, gayly. "The uniform is said to be the handsomest in Europe, and I can fancy you a count of the empire, with a marshal's baton, and a Theresian cross."

He laughed slightly, then bent forward and laid his lips on her hand.

"It all depends on you," he said, quickly. "You know what I am here for. You know the promise you gave me six months ago. I have tried not to hope too much, but I cannot believe that you doom me to such long waiting—only for disappointment. I am here for your decision, and I tell you now, what I told you before—take me and my ambition, and make them both what you will."

"I cannot believe that you doomed me to such long waiting—only for disappointment." Out of all his speech those were the words that rang in Valerie's ears like the voice of an accusing angel. He could not believe it of her; and yet—it was what she had done! What matter that she had done it ignorantly, carelessly, even thinking it for the best, when the bitter result was now staring her in the face? Yet she dared not hesitate—each moment of longer waiting was a deeper wrong—so she looked at the man, whom her promise had brought across the broad Atlantic, with a gaze that told him his sentence even before her lips uttered it, and answered almost mechanically:

"I was wrong, Charley, and—mistaken. I hoped to spare you this. I meant to have written to you, and told you what I have known for some time—that I do not love you well enough to marry you."

She spoke these few sentences so coldly and formally, so much like a lesson learned by rote, that it was no wonder Hautaine looked at her in mute, sorrowful amaze. There was silence for a moment, and then he uttered only one word—

"Valerie!"

The sound of her own name, spoken out of the very depths of his wounded, loving heart, touched her deeply. She looked up with an almost pitiful entreaty in her eyes.

"Oh, Charley, dear friend, try to forgive me! I never meant to treat you so! I never meant any thing so utterly heartless and shameful! I thought—indeed, I thought—that I loved you; but I find I do not, save as the best and kindest brother. You would not accept *that* love from your wife? You would not—"

"I would accept any thing in the world that gave me you," he interrupted, hastily. "If your refusal is based on the fear that you do not love me enough—Oh, Valerie, never hesitate. Come to me, and trust the rest with time and with me. Or wait, if you would rather do that. I am willing to be your bondsman six years instead of six months, with hope to lighten the way. Do any thing, sooner than put an end to every expectation that has been my life. For Heaven's sake, think of what you say!—for Heaven's sake, remember what you mean!"

He spoke eagerly and passionately, spoke with a force and pathos which showed Valerie plainly how much deeper was the disappointment now than before Hope had been whispering her siren song for months; before he had almost felt and owned her—his. Then out of the depths of her bitter humility came a great cry:

"Oh, Charley, Charley, believe me it is best so. Believe me, we are not, we never could be, suited to each other. Oh, it grieves me to the heart to think that I have seemed to trifle so wantonly with you—to remember that I might have saved you all this, if I had only been honest and true, last fall—if I had only told you then what I am sure of now—that I can never, never love you well enough to marry you."

She repeated this as if it were her one stronghold of defence, and he looked at her with a dark cloud that seemed like despair gathering over his face, as he said—

"You have learned this since we parted!"

"Does it matter how I learned it, if it be true?"

"And it is true?"

She bent her head slowly. "It is true."

There was nothing more to be said—nothing more to be urged. Hautaine seemed to feel this, for, after a moment, he spoke again, drearily enough:

"Then there is nothing for me but to go."

"To go!" she repeated.

"Yes—back to the life which you have made such an empty and useless thing. Don't think I mean to reproach you. It may not be your fault, but—"

She interrupted him passionately:

"Not my fault? It is mine alone. Oh, Charley, if I could bear *all* the suffering—yours as well as mine—I would not care so much. But it is the thought of you that breaks my heart—that makes me feel myself a wretch—that almost makes it a sin to be—"

"Happy," she would have added, if her voice had not broken down in a rush of tears—a perfect thunder-shower of emotion. Poor Charley was fairly frightened at its vehemence, and did his honest best to soothe and comfort her, but with very little effect. Half from nervous agitation, half from sincere self-reproach, she still wept on, and he was still bending over her, when the sound of an opening door made them both start—made Valerie look up through her tears, and Hautaine turn sharply round to see—

Maurice Darcy framed on the threshold.

CHAPTER V.

FACE TO FACE.

It was evident that he had only just entered—in time perhaps to hear Valerie's last words, but certainly not before; for, as she looked up, she caught his start of astonishment, and saw the same astonishment in his eyes as they glanced from herself to her companion. Involuntarily, she was about to speak, to say something—any thing that would explain; but the sudden darkening that came into those eyes, the sudden change that swept over his face—a change very much as if a stone mask had been fitted over the features—hushed all sound on her lips, and, when she turned toward Hautaine, surprise gave way to absolute terror.

In all her life, she never forgot the look with which those two men faced each other! Yet there was not in it any thing very desperate or very tragic. They did not look as if they meant to spring at each other's throats, or demand each other's lives, or do any thing else common to the rivals of melodrama. Indeed, it was easy to see that there was little or no recollection of rivalry between them. They knew each other—that was plain—but it was not as lovers of the same woman, but as men with some strong tie, some strong link of thought or deed in the past. Darcy still stood outlined in the door, but his very attitude had changed, and seemed to express the same stern immobility that marked his face, while Hautaine had risen, and was clutching nervously the back of a chair—his face strangely pale, his eyes full of mingled amazement and appeal. It was in this way that they stood gazing at each other in the hushed pause which fell over the room—in this way that they still remained when a minute, which seemed an age to Valerie, had passed away.

It was Charley who first broke the silence by one cry—a cry so full of mingled feeling that it would have been impossible to tell whether yearning passion, or pain, or entreaty, spoke most plainly in it:

"Maurice!"

That was all. But a hundred words could not have said more. It seemed as if Darcy's face softened for an instant when the sound went out toward him; but, if so, it was only for an instant. It looked as set and stern as before, when he spoke, very coldly:

"I regret that accident should have caused this meeting. You know me well enough to believe that it has not been intentional, and that it will be the last.—Miss Aylmer, I beg your pardon for such an intrusion. I had no idea that you were engaged."

He bowed slightly and distantly to Valerie; then, without further sign, turned to go. But Hautaine made one eager step forward—uttered one eager, imploring call.

"Stop, Maurice!" he cried. "One moment—only one moment!"

Darcy turned, with a look on his face that might have warned the other how little power could be gained by words over any resolve or decision of his.

"To what end?" he asked, not angrily, but in the same cold voice that was infinitely more relentless than anger.

"You ask me that?" the other cried, passionately. "My God! Do you think I have not suffered enough to make atonement for the past? If you could only know!—if you could only tell—"

"Why should I care either to know or to tell?" Darcy interposed, sternly. "What are your sufferings—granting their existence—to me? Can you give back to him the aims and objects of life? Can you give back to me the faith you betrayed? Can you give back to yourself the honor you forfeited? Do even one of these things, and I will acknowledge that your sufferings have worked some atonement for the evil they can never repair. Until then, go your way, as I shall go mine. But take this one warning with you—be careful how you cross my path. I spared you once; but I am only a man, and I may not spare you again."

The scarcely-repressed fire of this menace seemed to restore Hautaine to himself more quickly than any thing else could possibly have done. He looked up, and his voice was dignified, though grave and subdued, when he answered:

"You used to know me very well, and you may perhaps remember whether threats of that kind are likely to influence me. Besides, you could not take vengeance in cold blood on an unresisting man; and I don't think any words of yours would make me lift my hand against you. The great wrong which I wrought you—the wrong that has darkened my life over with the shadow of a curse—stands ever between us. Do what you please, say what you please, remembering this—that I shall not resent any thing."

"Why did you stop me, then?" Darcy demanded. "To hear this?"

"No. To tell you that *he* has forgiven me, and to ask—Maurice, to ask if you can never—"

He paused—almost despite himself, as it seemed—and Darcy finished the sentence for him without an instant's hesitation:

"If I can never forgive you? The answer to that is short. Never."

"Yet he—"

The other interrupted him almost fiercely.

"He is not a man, but something infinitely higher. And I, too, might forgive an injury dealt only to myself: but when it is twofold—nay threefold— Let us talk no longer. The very saints of God might feel that there are some wrongs too deep for atonement, too bitter for forgiveness, too lasting even for vengeance!"

All the passion within him seemed to reach its climax in those words, so that Hautaine shrank from their fiery energy as from a blow, and Valerie suddenly woke from a sort of trance, with indignation and pity swelling high in her breast. They might have forgotten her presence in the room, for all the notice they had taken of her; but now, suddenly and without warning, she rose up between them—a woman born to quell strife by command rather than by entreaty. Strange to say, she did not even look at Darcy, she only turned and spoke to Hautaine—Hautaine, who had been her playfellow and friend when they were children together under the Louisiana orange-trees—in a voice infinitely tender:

"Charley, why should you mind what he says? Why should his cruelty hurt you so? What is his forgiveness, that you should humiliate yourself to gain it? *I* believe in you—*I* am sure you never worked a deliberate harm, or inflicted a deliberate wrong. Stand fast in your own integrity. Surely, surely that is enough!"

Both men started with irrepressible surprise as she rose up and began to speak; then the effect on both was as different as could have been imagined. Charley held out his hand, with a silent gesture of gratitude, and a glance more eloquent than

words, while over Maurice Darcy's face there rolled a cloud heavy and dark as night.

He was not likely to reason at such a moment as that—few men perhaps would have been—yet he might have remembered how pitiless he had been in his severity, and that a woman's sympathy never fails to range itself on the weaker side. Surely if any thing about the sex may still be termed "divine"—may still be held above the rougher humanity of man, it is this one attribute, this unfailing impulse, which makes it ten times sweeter to bind up the wounds of defeat than those of victory, and which, since the beginning of the world has made them constant and persistent advocates of the losing side. Utterly illogical ones, it may be—but what of that? There are few advocates of any thing who can carry their principles more stanchly into action, and, however defective their reasoning may be, their practice, at least, is irreproachable.

Acting on impulse, like most of her sex, Valerie did not realize, until her words were past recall, what harm they had worked; then it all rushed over her, in the tone of Darcy's reply.

"Let me congratulate you on your partisan," he said to Hautaine, with icy bitterness. "And let me counsel you to follow her advice. My cruelty need not give you a moment's further concern, for we are not likely to meet again."

Then he turned and quitted the room.

As for the two left behind, they looked at each other in silence, until Hautaine extended his hands to his champion, who now sat down pale and trembling.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you more than—"

But she interrupted him almost passionately. "No—don't thank me. I only said it because he was so bitter and hard, and because—because I am sure you never did any thing unworthy of yourself. That was all."

"That was enough," he said, "if—if it were only true. But I would be even more pitiful than he thinks me, if I allowed you to believe any thing but that I am wrong, and that he is wholly right."

He spoke simply but earnestly, and, lifting her head, Valerie looked at him in mute surprise. He could say that!—when the stinging words and contemptuous tones of his stern accuser were still ringing in her ears. He could say that, remembering the unsparing denunciations which had been heaped upon him, and remembering, too, that he had even been charged with a forfeited honor! When she spoke, after a while, it was wonderingly.

"You know best; but it seems to me that scarcely any thing could justify all—all that he said. I am very sorry if you really have done any thing wrong—and still more sorry if you meant to do it—but my regard would be a worthless thing, indeed, if it failed you just when you have most need of it; or if I could let a single doubt shake the trust and affection of a lifetime. I want you to remember this thing: that there is no wrong which cannot be expiated; and that you would need go far on any road of error before you could estrange my—"

She stopped short, for a flash of sudden hope had banished all gloom and pain from the eyes fixed on her face; and there was in them an anxious entreaty that it was bitterly hard to disappoint. At that moment, she wellnigh wished that she could have added "love"—but at that moment she also felt, more strongly than ever before, that her lips would never, save in falsehood, utter that word to him.

"Your—what, Valerie?"

He asked this when the pause on her part had been very long, and she bent her head before him as she answered:

"My friendship, Charley."

He gave a deep sigh. "If you knew all, you might think, perhaps, that even your friendship was more than I had a right to expect, but it is very little to have crossed an ocean to receive. Valerie, I am very weak and very guilty—scarcely worthy even to touch your hand—but out of this very desolation, I cry to you: Come to me! Come to me!—love me—strengthen me! and, by the heaven above us, I swear that you can make me what you will."

He stood before her, more impassioned, more vehement than she had ever seen him

before. Ah, yes, he did love her—there could be no doubt of that. He had loved her so long, so faithfully, so well, and perhaps it was true that, if she went to him, she could make him what she would. Had Maurice Darcy ever looked or spoken like this? Had he ever put himself, his fate, his very life, into her keeping? Yet with what a great rush the woman's heart went out toward him—away, forever away from this eager, passionate paladin, who was ready to do and dare any thing for her sake, ready even to lay all freedom at her feet, and be a serf for evermore!

"Hush, Charley, hush!" she said, gravely. "Don't you see how that would be reversing all the right order of things, and how no happiness could ever come to either of us from it? You overrate my strength as much as you underrate your own. At all events, if you could stand with me, you can stand alone, and I am sure you will do so."

"Are you?" he said, with a faint, sad smile. "Well, for the sake of others, I trust you may be right. I see you are determined, so I will not weary you with any more useless entreaty. I hope I can meet my fate like a man—at least I can bid you good-by. This afternoon I leave for Louisiana."

"Oh, Charley, dear Charley," she cried, with all her heart in her throat, "speak to me once like the old time. Tell me once, before you go, that you forgive me. You don't know how I shall suffer in the thought of having pained you—you, my friend, my brother!"

It was almost the same appeal that she made to Julian Romney—as she remembered, the moment after she finished speaking. Yet nothing could have caused her to realize the immeasurable distance between these two men, who had both loved her to the utmost of their capability, as the answer which the young Southerner made—made in chivalric forgetfulness of self, in generous desire to shield her even from her own reproach:

"There is no need to mention such a word between us," he said. "You have not the slightest ground for blaming yourself. I was fully aware of the uncertainty of success; and, more than that, I had your own warning. I thought then that the merest chance was worth a trial, and I think so now. I have so little to regret, that I would freely do it all over again. Therefore, you see how misplaced any suffering of yours would be. You have not harmed me. No man ever yet was harmed by loving a pure woman, however hopeless that love might be, and it is only a coward who repines over the inevitable. You need not be afraid of that, Valerie; time will heal the wound, even if it can never efface the scar."

He spoke cheerfully, even with an attempt at lightness, which touched her more than any despondency could have done. Once more the warm tears rushed forth, as she knew that he was bidding her good-by, and she only managed to whisper a few last words.

"Charley, don't regret me! If you only knew what I am—indeed, indeed, I am not worth one throb of pain from such a heart as yours."

He only smiled faintly by way of reply. "Whatever my future life may know of love, you will still stand forever apart from all other women in my remembrance," he said. "There!—good-by. God only knows when we shall see each other again."

He left her fairly sobbing. Yet, when the hall door closed with that dreary clang which echoes "Good-by" so mournfully, she gathered back something of her usual composure and self-control. It was all over—over and beyond recall completely, so that repining was, as he had said, worse than useless, and all the tears of all the bright eyes that ever wept could not ease his heartache of one pang. There was a good deal of the philosopher, and still more of the fatalist, in Valerie's composition; and, more than any thing else, it was the realization of their uselessness which helped to dry her tears. She had just dashed the last glittering drop away, and had risen to go to her own room, when once more the door opened, and once more Darcy stood on the threshold.

He made no pause this time, but ad-

vanced directly into the room, until he met the woman whom he loved in exactly the same spot where he had faced the man whom he hated.

Then they stood looking at each other almost as long and as silently as the two who were friends once had done in that other meeting. It was only the old story with both—the story older even than Love—the uplifting of idols, and finding them possessed of feet of clay. They had not been very deeply steeped in the glamour of passion; each had fancied that he saw more than enough of mortal fault and mortal infirmity in the other; each had thought, as lovers like to think, of the change and improvement to be wrought in the nature knit unto his own; and, as their little disagreement of the night before had proved, each recognized the fact that there were many angles and outlines of character that might jar roughly together. Yet what of all this? They had faith, and love, and trust, between them; they might differ or fail to correspond on unimportant points, but they had perfect and entire belief in one another; while now—Ah, it was no wonder they gazed at each other in that sad, bitter silence. The darkness of desolation was upon them; for at their feet lay the shattered fragments of what they had possessed not twelve hours before, and what all the powers of earth could not give back to them now.

Darcy was the first to speak, with grave though somewhat formal composure.

"I am sure you do me the justice to believe, Miss Aylmer, that my intrusion, a short time ago, was entirely accidental, and without any knowledge that I should find you engaged. I am sincerely sorry for the annoyance I caused you, and I trust my entrance did not shorten the visit of your—your companion."

"No," Valerie answered, as coldly as he had spoken, "Mr. Hautaine was on the point of leaving when you entered."

He glanced involuntarily toward the sofa where he had found them—she weeping, and Charley bending over her—before he spoke again. Then it was in the same tone.

"Among the letters which I received this morning was one at which I barely glanced, and on which I failed to bestow even a moment's attention. I did not destroy it, however, because I wanted to find, if possible, some clew to the writer. Here it is. Will you read it?"

He drew several letters from his pocket as he spoke, selected one, and handed it to her with an air of distant courtesy which at once recalled the first days of their acquaintance. She took it with a sort of preoccupied quietude—wondering certainly, but scarcely enough to rouse her to even ordinary interest. At this supreme moment of her life—this moment quivering with great issues—what heed or care had she for any thing that could be contained in any letter that was ever written? So, although she took it without demur, she opened it carelessly, and still more carelessly ran her eye over the first lines; then there came a start, and a flash of blood to her face: but, although the hand which held the envelope closed over it tightly, she read on, without pause or comment, to the end. Yet this was what it proved to be:

A letter purporting to emanate, not from the usual anonymous "friend," but from an avowedly anonymous enemy. There was none of the usual cant concerning a sense of duty in the affair; but, on the contrary, the writer spoke with very candid bitterness. "I don't pretend to take any interest in you," the unknown said, "and it is not at all for your sake that I take the trouble to give these particulars, but Valerie Aylmer inflicted a deep wrong on me once—when or how does not matter—and I have waited for many a long day to pay my debt in kind. Nothing will be easier than for you to ascertain the truth or falsehood of all I assert, since there is scarcely a man or woman in Louisiana who is not able to vouch for every thing I say. If you think fit to disregard the warning, I can wish you no worse punishment than that which will speedily overtake you; I can wish you no more bitter memory than that of your wedding-day, even though you receive with your bride the magnificent dower of the heiress of a millionnaire." Then followed a record which would have made the cheek of any woman burn with rage and shame. All her old gay

coquetries were brought up against her in blackening array. The names and the bare outline of facts were given accurately, but every incident was distorted, every folly magnified, every indiscretion heightened, every result darkened, until she who had dealt only in that light, playful warfare which never yet worked serious ill to any head or heart, was painted as a sort of baleful enchantress, somewhat after the model of those who have lately figured in the pages of a certain class of fiction. Poor Valerie! Her sins, if sins they could be called, had lately been falling heavily enough upon her head, but this seemed the last drop in the cup. Still she read on—on through the cunning mixture of falsehood and fact—until she reached the climax of the whole. That climax was her life-long *affaire* with Hautaine. There, in pitiless black and white, she read the history that had culminated and ended forever that day. There was not much exaggeration in this, nor much need for it, and, save as regarded the statement of an absolute engagement existing between them when she left Louisiana, there was scarcely a single assertion that it was possible for her to deny. Of course they bore a different interpretation from that of reality, but then who of us have not, at some time of our lives, felt powerless before this? Can we bring back the dead acts of the past, and show what a difference in their seeming the circumstances of the time, or the subtlety of intention made? Can we refute the words of our own lips by putting back into them the vanished spirit which made their living meaning so different from their cold, dead evidence? Ah, never! And it was this chill certainty which gathered round Valerie's heart, as she looked up at last, with a single monosyllable:

"Well?"

"Do you recognize the hand, or any turn of words, that can tell you who the writer is?" Darcy asked, quietly. "I should like to know."

She looked down again for a moment, and then shook her head, as she handed it back. "No," she said, wearily; "and—what does it matter? The post-mark is New Orleans; but I cannot think I left any enemy at home who would stab me in the dark like this. We Louisianians may hate to the death, but we never express our hatred like cowards. I would rather not conjecture any thing about it, for I am sure my conjecture would fail to touch the right mark, and I could never forgive myself if I wronged my worst enemy by such a suspicion. Besides, as I said before, what does it matter? I see it has done its work. I see you believe it."

"Believe it!" he repeated, and all his outward calm suddenly vanished before the generous light that flashed into his face. "Believe it!—this vile thing? What do you take me for? See!—this is how much I believe it."

He crushed it in his hand as he spoke, and the next instant it lay shrivelling on the glowing coals that heaped the grate—sent there by one quick gesture. Then he faced round upon her, with a sudden passion of resolve in his eyes.

"That is how much I believe it!" he said. "There is the measure of credence I give its calumnies! Have you forgotten so soon what I told you last night? Have you forgotten already that my honor is pledged to receive only one evidence concerning you—the evidence of your own lips? If I showed you this letter, it was only that you might justify yourself—that you might explain what I saw here this morning, which seemed to come in such apparent confirmation of all that was written there."

The frank chivalry of the man's nature rang in every tone of loyal trust and truth—yet what a dull, heavy echo it was that Valerie's heart gave back! Justify herself! As if justification was possible in the sense he meant it! A cold torpor seemed creeping over her, as she answered, almost mechanically:

"Why do you trouble me? It is evident that you have already judged me unheard. Why not condemn me unheard also?"

"Am I not waiting to hear you now?" he asked, quickly. "If I had judged you unheard, do you think I should have cared to enter your presence again, after the scene I witnessed scarcely half an hour ago?—after the words you uttered when you turned against me to take the part of the

man who has injured me beyond repair? Have you forgotten all this? And does it look like condemnation?"

"No, I have not forgotten," she answered, with the same listless quietude; "but I have nothing to say. Your very questions prove that you *do* suspect me; and I did not need your conduct to Charley to prove how hard and stern you can be. I have no intention of imploring your mercy as he did. Perhaps it will be best that every thing should end, for I do not think we are likely to learn even a moderate degree of tolerance for each other. I might bear severity; but I should revolt once for all against cruelty—and you who suspect so early, would hardly grow more trusting as time went on. And yet—"

Her voice broke down here, for a sudden remembrance of what she was doing, of what she was ending, rushed over her. If Darcy had spoken one word of love or trust then, all might have been well. But the coldness of her repulse stung him deeply—him who was very far from being a model hero of romance, but only a man unreasonable and loving, like other men; a man who had striven hard to put his just doubts aside, and ask as a favor the explanation which he might have demanded as a right, and who found this requital very bitter. So he took up her sentence, finishing it coolly·

"And yet happiness seemed very near to us last night. But you may be right; we may be too unlike ever to agree. It would seem so, at least, since you will not give me one single proof of good faith. It is only a few words I ask; but perhaps you had better consider before you even think of speaking them. I am undoubtedly a stern, even a hard man—though I scarcely think a cruel one—and a man who, having always received obedience from others, cannot dispense with it in my wife. That point is best made clear at once. And, if impulse swayed you yesterday, don't allow compassion to influence you to-day; or, in other words, do not think of me. I have lived without love in the past, and I can live without it in the future. Think only of yourself, and decide only for yourself."

Alas! If she had thought only of herself, she would have held out her hands to him with one cry of weary relief, and closed her eyes forever to all the doubt around her. It might have been the wisest course to adopt; but she was not the woman to see this. On the contrary, his hard tone hardened her in turn. She contrasted it with the tones that so shortly before had echoed in that room. He could not speak thus, she thought, if he had ever felt one throb of real passion. If he had desired to hear the words of which he spoke, he would never have pleaded for them like that. So the moment of opportunity rolled by for both, and, when she spoke, it was half haughtily.

"This is very useless indeed. I have not forgotten your judgment of Charley; and, if I humiliated myself as you desire, I would only bring down such another on my own head. Even now you talk of hearing me; but I should be blind indeed if I did not see that you believe me to have been engaged to him, even when I accepted yourself."

The tone of the assertion made it a question, and she paused as if for an answer. After a moment, one came—steady and firm.

"Remembering what I witnessed here half an hour ago, I am constrained to say that I hope so."

Had she looked at the matter for a moment, from his point of view, she might have acknowledged the justice of this; but, as it was, all tenderness, all regret, all memory of the past, all hope of the future, vanished, leaving only the sense of keen injustice.

"You insult me!" she cried, passionately. "You insult me, as I have never been insulted before in all my life! And, after that, do you expect me to justify myself in your eyes? A thousand times, no! If you can believe that I deceived you so shamefully, believe it! Only do me the justice to believe also that I shall never offer you any proof to the contrary. You may credit all that—that letter said, if you choose! If you think I could act in such a manner, why, it does not matter in the least whether I really did it or not. The *capability* is the only point of importance. And poor Char-

ey—my poor friend! To think that your hate should follow him so bitterly that you must use his honest love by means of which to brand me with duplicity! If you only knew what a comparison you are forcing me to institute! If you only knew how utterly he would scorn the part you are playing now!—he who has never broken a pledge, or uttered a vow that was falsehood—he who has never harbored an unworthy suspicion, or made love the tool of interest. But then—he has never been tempted by the glitter of an inheritance."

She scarcely knew how her flood of bitter passion would terminate, until the last words passed her lips. Then she gave a great gasp, for she saw that it was all over; that no repentance, no regret, could undo it now. Any other taunt, any other charge, might have been forgiven—but never this! Even as she looked, the features hardened, and into the deep-gray eyes there flashed a quick gleam; yet he gazed at her almost incredulously for a moment, before he answered. Then it was with very proud dignity.

"You are not yourself at present," he said. "I think you are scarcely conscious of how much your words imply; so I do not consider it necessary to resent them. In your cooler moments, you will see the injustice of such a charge; but, even if not, it hardly matters. You were right a little while ago, in saying that this had better end. You do not deny the existence of another engagement when you accepted me; in confirmation of which I cannot help recalling your reluctance to make a public acknowledgment of that acceptance. Whether you meant to keep faith with him or with me, I have no means of knowing; but your grief at his departure, your passionate espousal of his cause, leave me no room to doubt that your heart at least was in his keeping, even while you promised your hand to me. Of how little worth a hand so given would be, it is not for me to say. Then you have seen fit to charge me with deliberate falsity. That alone would end all between us. And now, I have only one thing to add. If you merely wished to gratify your vanity by another triumph, it is yours. But it would afford you scant gratification if you could know the sentiments which have forever taken the place of love toward you. You have done your worst and your last. It will never again be in your power to inflict another pang upon me."

The grave, chill tones ceased—the tones so entirely without one modulation of passion, that they sounded like the inexorable fiat of Fate—and then he walked deliberately to the door. It opened and closed upon him. Silence complete and deep settled over all things; and, as Valerie sat motionless, she felt as if her life had come to an end then and there.

CHAPTER VI.

PAYING HIS DEBT.

"Why, Hautaine, my dear fellow, is this really yourself? By Jove! I am delighted to see you!"

It was the most frank and cheery voice in the world that spoke thus, as Hautaine, absorbed in his own moody thoughts, was striding along the lower part of Charles Street. The touch of a hand on his shoulder accompanied the words, and turning sharply—almost impatiently—he met the cordial eyes and more cordial face of Harry Arle. A misanthrope could hardly have failed to thaw at such a genial sight; and Hautaine was the farthest in the world from being a misanthrope; so he held out his hand with something not very unlike his usual air of good-fellowship.

"Arle, isn't it?" he said. "There's a good deal of change, but still I think I recognize my six-months' companion on a Texas gunboat."

"Ah, yes, we didn't dress this way in those days," the other said, gayly, "but *qu'importe?* They were the very best of days—the cream of life—and we know each other when we meet, despite the tailor and the barber. I wish I could tell you how glad I am to see you again!"

"And I you," said Hautaine, sincerely

enough, though ten minutes before he would have done any thing reasonable to avoid the encounter. As it had come about, however, he accepted it philosophically, and was not the man to chill an old comrade's honest warmth by coldness or indifference.

"And to think that this is our first meeting since we blew up the old Chicora, and shook hands on the beach with the intention of running for our lives in different directions!" Arle continued, as they loosed the friendly grasp of their hands, and walked on together. "What have you been doing with yourself in the interim? Somebody said you had turned free lance, and gone to the Holy Empire of Mexico."

"Somebody was quite right as far as turning free lance went," Hautaine answered, "but as for the Holy Empire of Mexico—I must really be excused, if I prefer some service where a long rope or a quick bullet are not the invariable rewards of merit."

"But you haven't been in Louisiana ever since you lowered your flag, have you?"

"No—I have been in Paris most of the time."

"Ah, happy fellow!" said Arle, with a very genuine air of envy. "If *that's* your place of service, I should have no objection to turning free lance myself. And what in the name of wonder brings you from Paris to Baltimore?"

He asked the question heedlessly, and the next moment felt as much embarrassed as a man who has made an egregious blunder, and is conscious of it, can possibly feel. He had been long in Louisiana, and sufficiently among Louisiana men, to hear most of the gossip afloat about *La belle des belles*, and he knew that this gossip had coupled her name more often with Hautaine's than with any other among her many lovers and countless admirers. He remembered her presence in Baltimore, and—well, the rest was so clear that he felt very much ashamed of his stupidity, and hastened on hurriedly, before his companion could reply.

"I hope you mean to spend some time among us. We can't, of course, offer any attractions to a travelled cosmopolitan who is fresh from Les Italiens and Véry's, but we can show you some pretty women—though the prettiest comes from your own state—and you'll meet plenty of old comrades who will be delighted to see you."

"I need not say how much I should enjoy both," Hautaine answered as truthfully, perhaps, as the most of us answer when we say such things; "but the fact is, I am Southward bound this afternoon."

"Necessarily?"

"Necessarily."

"Indeed I am heartily sorry to hear it"—and for once the commonplace words had in them the ring of genuine sincerity—"I was just thinking of several people who would be wonderfully charmed to see you, and wonderfully chagrined to miss that pleasure. You remember Lawton?"

"Of the James River fleet? Undoubtedly."

"Well, he was talking of you only the other day. And then there's Conway—Jack Conway—you surely know *him?* He was in the old service."

"Know him!" and the abstracted eye suddenly brightened with pleasure. "I should think I did indeed! We went out as midshipmen together on our first cruise. The best fellow!—Is he really here?"

"He really is. And Darford, and Meredith, and—and plenty more. So you see it is impossible for you to go, without at least one *réunion* to put us in mind of the past. Come! Defer your departure until to-morrow afternoon, and take supper with me to-night. Every man of them shall be there to bid you welcome. Do you say yes?"

Hautaine hesitated. The frank invitation was not nearly so much of a temptation as it should have been. But he felt so reckless, indifferent about almost every thing, that he was half inclined to say "yes," from pure indolence about saying "no." There was no earthly reason why he should not defer his departure twenty-four hours, and he could more easily drown thought in a jovial supper-party, than walking the deck of the Portsmouth boat. And yet he hesitated. It might have been his guardian angel that caused him to do so; that whispered in his ear so urgently, "Go;" that made him so strangely averse to delay; but, if so, the ad-

vice was not a whit more regarded than that of guardian angels usually is.

"You'll stay?" Arle said, who saw how the scale was turning.

And the other answered, with a reckless defiance of instinct:

"It is very good of you to urge it, and yes—I'll stay."

So the weight fell heavily in the scale of fate, and the matter was settled. He stayed.

It was by no means a large or very noisily convivial party who assembled that evening to do justice to Arle's hospitality; and their enjoyment was that of men who were accustomed to do things decently and in order. They were all "old Confederates," all men whose laughing glances had looked on danger and death in countless guise, whose bronzed faces had taken sunshine and rain as either came, on the deck or in the camp—with but one exception. This exception, strange to say—and it accounted for something of a cloud on the sunny brow of the young host—was Julian Romney. "It's deucedly unpleasant," he said, in answer to an aside interrogation on the subject, from Thornton; "I know that as well as you do, but—I couldn't help it without next thing to insulting the fellow. He was with Darford when I asked *him*, and—well, I thought it would not matter much, and I might as well be civil once in a way. I think we've all rather cut him of late, and he feels it."

"So it's a philanthropic thing you're in for doing?" Thornton answered, with a shrug. "I wish you joy of your subject; but I'm sadly afraid you've spoiled your party. There's not a man here who even barely likes Romney; and he's so devilish bad-tempered of late that there's no counting on consequences. However, I'll do my best to keep the peace—perhaps we have been a little hard on him—but don't put me opposite him. That face of his would be intolerable to me."

But perhaps the most thoroughly surprised and least pleased of the party was Hautaine himself, when the stranger was presented to him, and he remembered his close connection with the Vacquant family. A hot, sharp pang of jealousy shot through and through him, as he looked at the handsome face—handsome yet, although evil lines had been ploughed around the beautiful mouth, and on the smooth white brow—and thought in his heart that this young Adonis must necessarily be the rival who had stolen from him the prize of his life. And it chanced that, as he thought this, with wistful, honest envy, Arle said, suddenly:

"By-the-by, I am very sorry that Darcy could not join us. I don't suppose you ever met him, Hautaine; but he served in Virginia during the whole war, and is the most capital fellow you can imagine. It's rather curious, too, that we were speaking of Mexico, this morning; and he tells me he's going there."

This unexpected statement created so much of a sensation, that no one noticed Hautaine's silence or his change of color.

"What, Darcy going to Mexico!"

"The deuce! You must be mistaken."

"It's rather late in the day for *that!*"

"I can't believe it possible!"

"When did he say so? Are you sure about it, Hal?"

"I am perfectly sure that he told me so," Arle answered; "and I don't think he's a man to say one thing and mean another—or to say a thing, even if he means it, and then change his mind. I went to his studio and found him busy packing up: so I naturally inquired if he was going to change the apartment. He said yes—for good. Naturally, again I asked, 'How so?' and then he said that he leaves for New York to-night, and sails to-morrow for Havre."

"And do you call *that* Mexico?" put in an incredulous listener.

"No—I don't. And neither did he. Of course, I said—sincerely enough too—how sorry we shall be to lose him; and then I asked him if he meant to set up an *atelier* in Paris. The answer was, that he was tired of painting, and, in less than a month, he expected to be in Mexico."

"But what for?" demanded two or three, impatiently.

At which the Signor Arle shrugged his shoulders.

"Who can say, *mes amis?* Do you al

ways know what you intend to do, and why you mean to do it? Darcy simply told me what I tell you, that he is tired of painting —I have heard him say that before—that he liked action, that he wasn't tired of fighting, and that he meant to go to Mexico and get enough of it—*voila tout!*"

"Perhaps he thinks Maximilian will make him a duke or a marshal," said Darford, lazily.

"Perhaps you will pass the decanter at your elbow," Thornton said, "and we'll drink to his success and happiness, wherever he goes. He is one of the few men, whom I ever met, that I am sorry to see drop out of my life. It's rather early in the evening for toasts, but still, as long as he's on the *tapis*, let us pledge him in the wine he is not here to enjoy."

So they pledged him deeply, and, as Romney set down his glass, he looked at Hautaine with a glance which the latter met and understood as little as possible. How could he, indeed, be supposed to know that this man, whom he esteemed his favored rival, was just then thinking with bitter rage that he—Hautaine—had by his success sent the lover of yesterday out of their common path. "Curse him! He must have won the day after all!" Romney thought; and then he set his teeth together with a sudden, savage resolve which did not accord very well with the gay tones and peals of laughter, the lights and wine, and generally festive air of all things around them.

For the next hour or two, however, every thing went on as smoothly and pleasantly as a host's heart could desire. They all knew each other so well, they had gone through so much of adventure together, and loved and drank and fought in intimate comradeship so long, that there was nothing whatever to chill or repress the genial warmth that pervaded every thing said or done, even to the very stories and jests. Romney conducted himself in quite an irreproachable manner: he said little, for reminiscences of field and flood were not exactly in his way, but that little was in very good taste, and only one or two of those who sat nearest him noticed that he drank more constantly and deeply than any one else at the table. He was so accustomed to this, however, that it had no perceptible effect on his head, when, by some chance, the conversation veered round to Darcy again.

"I shall never forget Darcy's gallantry that day," one of the party said—he had been telling a campaigning anecdote of some description or other—"he was serving on R——'s staff then, and there was no earthly reason for his going into the fight with us; but he did—as a volunteer, you know—and distinguished himself wonderfully. Maximilian may be glad to see such nerve and pluck coming into his empire, I can tell you. But, then, I can't help thinking that the move is a confoundedly queer one—in him."

"Certainly the land of the Montezumas is about the last place in the world that I should care about finding myself in just now," said Conway. "I remember the last time I was at Vera Cruz—"

"Yellow fever, or a revolution, was there also, no doubt," said Thornton, interrupting him. "We'll take either fact for granted; but I decidedly object to your spinning another long-winded yarn. You've only told half a dozen already this evening. But you're right about Darcy. It's so very queer, this move of his—that for once, I have some curiosity to know a little of motive and meaning. Can't anybody throw any light on the subject?"

"If it wasn't Darcy," said Arle, with a laugh, "I should think that I detected the mark of feminine claws in the business; but he is quite above such a suspicion."

"No man is above it," said Darford, sententiously. "We are all fools, sooner or later; and why not Darcy, like the rest of us? He has been very attentive to Miss Rivière lately—mayn't she have proved hard-hearted?"

"You might as well talk of a canary's proving hard-hearted," Thornton answered, impatiently. "She's a perfect child, in the first place, and one of the women who couldn't say no to anybody, if her life depended on it, in the second."

"She said it to one late lamented friend, Godon Bird, without much hesitation," Darford rejoined. "I have that much of

knowledge, for I was penned in a corner, and heard the whole declaration. She did it very neatly too, I can tell you; and finished up poor Bird so completely, that he donned his feathers, and took flight for some other region next day."

"And you call that a case in point?" asked Arle. "Any woman in her sane senses would have said no to that fool; but as for Darcy—the thing's absurd. Besides, I don't believe he ever thought of falling in love with her. She's pretty enough; but she's more in your style than his."

"I'll leave the matter to Romney. He's been living in the house with both of them, so he ought to know," Darford answered. "Julian, old fellow, can you tell us who's right?"

Julian looked up quickly, with a sudden light in his eyes which the other did not understand—a light of exultation at seeing his chance so soon and so clear.

"Neither of you is right," he answered. "Miss Rivière has no more to do with Darcy's movements than I have; but—I wonder you never thought that he had been very closely under the guns of a more dangerous woman than she will ever be, if she lives a hundred years."

"By Jove!" cried more than one voice. "You don't mean that *La belle des belles* has crippled him too?"

Julian turned round to Hautaine, with a smile.

"I mean," he said, "that Mr. Hautaine can satisfy your curiosity on that score better than I, and that he can also tell you exactly why Captain Darcy's resolution to go to Mexico has only been formed since his own arrival in Baltimore."

The words fell clearly and distinctly on every ear at the table, and every eye turned at once to Hautaine's face—the face that had suddenly grown pale and full of startled surprise. The attack was as unexpected as any thing could possibly have been; but it did not deprive him entirely of self-possession; on the contrary, he answered, readily and coolly:

"I don't understand you, Mr. Romney. Perhaps you will be kind enough to explain yourself."

"The matter is scarcely worth an explation," Julian answered, carelessly. "We all know the old proverb about ignorance being bliss, and we also know—most of us—Miss Aylmer's favorite modes of disposing of her troublesome admirers."

"It is a matter of profound indifference to me what you may or may not know," Hautaine answered coldly, "except in thus far—that neither you nor any other man has ever known, or can ever know, any thing of Miss Aylmer which is not to her honor and credit."

Julian laughed—a sneering laugh which made the blood stir angrily in the veins of more than one of his listeners—and then answered in the same clear, musical voice:

"It is a very fine thing to be chivalric, Mr. Hautaine, especially about the woman whom you wish, or expect, or intend, to marry. But it's rather late in the day to take that tone about the most notorious flirt in America. I don't pretend to know how the matter was settled betwen Darcy and yourself, or how Miss Aylmer made good her story to either of you; but I *do* know that she was engaged yesterday to the man who, whether jilter or jilted, is going to Mexico to-day."

Hautaine gave one uncontrollable start. It was impossible that he could have avoided it, since the thought of any thing between Valerie and Darcy flashed on him for the first time with overwhelming surprise. His mind went back like lightning to the scene of that day—the scene when she had come between them and taken his part—and he gave a gasp, half of astonishment, half of incredulity. He was so taken by storm, as it were, that for a moment he could not answer Romney. Then, it was more the conventional instinct than any thing else that made him say:

"And whether this be true or not—you must excuse me if I say that the presumptive evidence is all against it—will you allow me to inquire in what manner it concerns you?"

Julian looked at him for a moment before he answered, slowly:

"It concerns me exactly as it concerns any one else—yourself for instance—who

has contributed to the amusement and enjoyed the favors of *La belle des belles.*"

The tone of this sentence made its insult to the woman whose name he spoke so apparent, that it was the young host who said quickly.

"Romney, you forget yourself. This is no mode in which to discuss a lady. Let us change the subject."

"No," Hautaine interrupted, before any one else could speak. "Don't change the subject before I have said one word to Mr. Romney. He has thought fit to put me in the same category with himself, as having contributed to the amusement and enjoyed the favors of Miss Aylmer. What my connection with her has been, does not concern him in the least; but his conduct to-night has proved that, if he ever contributed to her amusement, it was too much honor for a man who cannot speak of her as befits a gentleman; and that the only favors he could ever have enjoyed must have been in common with the servants who place chairs and open doors for her."

"Do you mean—" Julian began, hotly, when Thornton's hand fell on his shoulder.

"That is quite enough, Mr. Romney," he said, sternly. "This is not a drinking-saloon, where you can quarrel and fight as you please; and we are not blacklegs, but gentlemen. You have strangely forgotten several things to-night; among others, courtesy to your host, when you attack one of his guests in this unprovoked manner."

It is doubtful if Julian even heard the words, forcibly uttered as they were, for he only shook off the restraining hand, and finished his sentence to the young Louisianian, who looked at him with eyes full of contemptuous disdain across the table:

"Do you mean to insult me, Mr. Hautaine?"

"I had no such intention," Hautaine answered, coolly; "but you can construe my words as you please."

"You will answer for them, then?"

"No," he replied, scornfully. "I should not dream of beingguilty of such a disrespect to Miss Aylmer as to allow her name to be drawn any further into a discussion where it has no right to be at all. I have told you what I think of yourself and your statements, and that is all I shall do.—Arle, you were right a little while ago—shall we change the subject now?"

But it was hardly worth while to do so, for all their pleasant spirit and ease seemed suddenly to have forsaken the party. Of course they made an effort to be gay and genial once more; but it was so palpably an effort, that the failure which ensued was only what might have been expected. If Romney would have done the only proper thing, i. e., gone away, perhaps they might have got over it after a while; but how was it possible to be any thing but awkward and uncomfortable with that overcast presence in their midst? So they drank their wine absently, and talked heavily on business, and politics, and the like topics, but nobody even attempted to go back to the themes of adventure and daring which had stirred them into such warm life a short time before. They were all gentlemen, and so, accustomed to submit unhesitatingly to the conventionalities of social life; but the ruder instincts of the man made more than one of them look at Romney, and think how pleasant it would be to rid themselves of him by a very summary process of ejectment. Before long, Arle made the movement to leave table, and then, while the rest were scattered about the room smoking, he drew Julian aside.

"I am the last man in the world to wish to revive any thing unpleasant," he said, "but I am sure that, if you think a moment, Romney, you will see that you owe Hautaine an apology. He is not only entitled to special courtesy as a stranger among us, but he has been a life-long friend of the Aylmer family. Of course I take it for granted that you did not know this, or you could not have spoken as you did. It only makes it the more imperative, though, that you should apologize."

"And suppose I decline to do so?" Julian asked, sullenly.

The other looked at him with surprise, that had not a little of contempt in it.

"I am totally unable to suppose such a thing," he answered, gravely. "You do not forget, I am sure, the obligation of courtesy

which rests upon us as Baltimoreans and as gentlemen. You cannot even forget what you owe to me—since you insulted my guest at my table. But if you should forget these things—"

"Well," said Julian, in a tone of defiance, as he paused, 'if I should forget them—what then?"

"Why, then," said the young Marylander, haughtily, "the matter becomes personal between us two; and, as no man living owes a deeper debt of gratitude to Miss Aylmer than I do, I shall take upon myself the duty of demanding full retraction and apology for the sneer cast on her a little while ago."

"This is all nonsense, Mr Arle, and you ought to know it as well as I do," said Julian, bruskly. "I am not a man to be browbeaten; and I haven't the slightest intention of retracting or apologizing for any thing I may have said or insinuated about Valerie Aylmer. If you are anxious for a quarrel, I am not likely to balk your humor. If not, I shall have the honor of wishing you good-evening."

The calm insolence of his tone provoked Arle, as it might have provoked even a milder man. He looked at him with quick, contemptuous scorn, when he answered in a tone that did full justice to the words:

"You can go, if you like, of course; but I hope you will be kind enough to strike my name from your list of acquaintances after to-night. I gave you credit before this for slandering like a woman; but I didn't give you credit for refusing to accept the consequences like a man."

"That is quite enough," Julian said, in a tone of suppressed passion. "I see it *is* the quarrel you want, and you might have had it without this last insult. I take it for granted that you're not so pacific as your friend, and that you mean to answer for your words."

"I am at your service," the other answered, coldly. Then, with a formal bow on each side, they parted.

An hour or two later, all the preliminaries of the meeting were arranged, and this was how Harry Arle paid his debt to Valerie Aylmer.

CHAPTER VII.

TOUT EST PERDU.

After Darcy left her, no one saw anything more of Miss Aylmer. She went to her own room, and, locking the door, refused admittance to every one, even to Alix. There was a dinner-party arranged for that evening, which caused Madame Vacquant to send up several appeals for her presence; but the same inflexible refusal was returned to all. For once in her life, *les convenances* had lost all power over Valerie; and she, who only a short time before thought she would have died ere a single pang of hers should have been exhibited to curious or malignant eyes—she, like many another, when the test came, found that theory and practice are essentially different things. The same impulse took her to her chamber, and closed her door upon the outer world, that takes a wounded wild animal to its lair to suffer—it may be even to die—alone.

How much she suffered, she could not have told herself; for the blow had been so sudden and sharp that it partially deadened sensation; and the time remained in her after-memory almost a blank. She could only recall the utter and forlorn abandonment of misery that seemed to weigh upon her, as she tested the first bitterness of her desolation. She could only recall a dim picture of herself, as she sat by the window, watching, in a sort of passive stupor, the falling snow, and listening to the church clocks as they told the passage of time that had lost all significance for her. The sounds of the house and of the street came as to muffled ears. The hours passed, but left not a token of their flight behind them; and when the day wore on, and at last the shades of night began to close over the scene on which she gazed, she could scarcely have told whether the consciousness of this was most relief or pain. That day, which should be marked in black as the most miserable of her life, was past. But then, what an interminable vista of other days stretched before her! To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow! They were all to bear, all to suffer, all to live through—

alone! This prospect, which is bitter sometimes even to the naturally patient and well disciplined, was something far more than bitter to this uncurbed, rebellious nature. She told herself, with fierce emphasis, that it was unendurable, that she would never bear it; and then she broke down in a burst of burning tears, because she felt in her inmost heart that the barrier against which she dashed herself was granite; and that, come what would of grief or pain, she *must* endure, she *must* bear it. She had sown the seed: she must reap the harvest. There was nothing for it but resignation; and yet the mere thought of such a thing came to her as a mockery. Resignation! That might answer for the pale, heavy-eyed children of suffering and toil; for those on whom was branded deep the signet of fiery trials, for whom life was nothing save one long martyrdom; but for her—her in the royal zenith of her youth and power—her to whom enjoyment and pleasure, and the sweets of love, and the gifts of life, were all of right divine—how should she ever learn the grand lesson of those grand words which she had spoken, with only a dim, half-heedful sense of their meaning, so short a time before—"He who best knows how to endure, shall possess the greater peace?"

At dark, Fanchette brought up the coffee, which she considered the only proper thing for such a headache as Miss Aylmer was supposed to be suffering with. Then the blinds were closed, the fire replenished, and she was left again to silence. Then again the same lethargy crept over her, and she lay in a large chair, watching the glowing bed of coals as blankly as she had watched the feathery wreaths of snow, listening vaguely to the strains of music and echo of gay voices that floated up faintly from the drawing-room whenever the doors were opened, and wholly unconscious how late it was growing, until Fanchette came up at midnight sincerely surprised that she had not been summoned to her usual night duties of the toilet. Perhaps *les convenances* began to resume something of their sway, for her mistress murmured a half excuse for the omission, and then prepared to go to bed. Once there, strange to say, she slept deeply—slept the spent sleep of exhaustion. But this period of rest was not very long. The first gray gleam of morning waked her, as it streamed through a half-opened blind, over her bed. The first impulse was to turn her face away, and strive to win a little longer unconsciousness—but that was vain. The tyrant Thought had resumed his mastery, and sleep was impossible. So sharp were the recollections which rushed over her, that almost unconsciously she sprang from her pillows as if they had been filled with thorns. Endurance—passive endurance, at least—had reached its farthest limit. Come what would, she felt goaded to the last verge, she felt that she must for a time escape from herself. She looked round the walls of her room that yesterday had seemed to her a shrine of refuge; now it took the aspect of a prison. And then it was that there came another impulse—the impulse to carry her misery to the sanctuary, and lay it down before the altar where never yet a human soul has gone for comfort and failed to find it.

She rose at once, and dressed herself quickly, scarcely observing the cold atmosphere of her room, where the last night's fire had died away to blackness. Then she went down-stairs, and along the dark passages, unfastened the heavy bolts with a good deal of difficulty, and let herself out of the front-door. The snow and sleet of the night before had changed to a fine rain, which the wind drove straight in her face as she took her way down Charles Street; but she scarcely felt, and certainly paid no heed to it. The hour was so early that as yet there was scarcely any thing astir, or anybody to be seen, save a few milk-wagons, in the first place, and one or two drowsy policemen in the second. But when she opened the cathedral door, a pleasant sense of warmth stole over her, and there were many kneeling forms scattered over the demi-obscure of the large church, the spacious aisles and lofty dome of which looked solemnly vast as a few gas-lights which illuminated the seats nearest the altar strove vainly to pierce the general gloom. The priest was in the act of consecration when she entered, and a profound stillness reigned over all

things—only broken now and then by the silver tinkle of the acolyte's bell giving warning of the elevation. The door clanged behind her, and her steps fell with an almost painful distinctness on the paved aisle; but there was no stir among the kneeling forms between whom she passed, not a head was lifted, not an eye turned from the altar, nor did a single lip cease its fervently-uttered prayer. This in itself was a relief—this in itself proved that she had come to one place in the world where curiosity does not find admittance, where the wretched and the weary may go, sure that no inquisitive glances will seek them out, and force upon them the scrutiny which they feel to be almost more than they can bear. She sank down in one of the farther pews that had been left to darkness, and then, for a brief time, the sore heart found rest. She knew that the pang would return—all the sharper and sterner, perhaps—but for a time it was stilled. For a time, she could lay down the burden of error and grief, for a time sink in humiliation before the altar, and, with her eyes on the thorn-crowned head above her, say, "Lord, I am weak and frail—be Thou my strength." And it seemed to her alone—to her in her bitterness and rebellion—that the priest spoke when, turning round, he uttered the solemn "Sursum corda." Sursum corda! Ay, lift them up!—up from the clouds and mist of this troubled world!—up from the trials that meet, and the temptations that beset!—up from the weary struggle!—up from the failing flesh!—up from the constant sin!—up from the wrong, the strife, the suffering!—up to the glorious vision of a realm where neither sin nor pain shall have any more dominion over us!

Two masses had been said before Valerie thought of leaving the church, and then it was only when a sick faintness—the result of physical exhaustion—rushed over her, that she felt the necessity of doing so. Yet it was very hard to quit that serene sanctuary, to leave that one haven of rest and refuge, and go back to the fierce turmoil and dreary hopelessness of existence. She rose from her knees lingeringly, and yet more lingeringly looked around her. The slight stir of priests and acolytes at the high altar scarcely disturbed the pervading calm which brooded over the whole interior; and her heart—her poor, aching, yearning heart—seemed hushed and stilled by the ineffable peace. But long and painful emotion had done its work, and she felt that she must go, for even now a strange giddiness seized her, and a strange mist rose over all the objects at which she gazed. She walked slowly down the aisle, but at the door paused again. There was only one more step, and the noise of the world would rush over her, the excitement of the world would claim her; so, crossing herself with holy water, she looked wistfully back toward the distant altar, the calm statues, the sanctuary lamp gleaming like a faint, pale star, and felt—was it an instinct?—as if she could not bear to go. But a little child, who was entering, held open the door for the beautiful lady who stood there so strangely motionless; two women stared at her as they came down the aisle together; and, waking to a knowledge of these things with a start, she drew down her veil and went away.

She walked slowly homeward through the misty rain—how well she remembered afterward the aspect which every thing bore that morning!—thinking to herself that this was a type of what her life was to be hereafter. This dull-gray sameness was to be hers, instead of the sunshine of love and hope that had made existence so fair and beautiful only yesterday. Yesterday! Was it only yesterday? It seemed as if it must have been so long ago, as if the gulf which divided her from happiness was years, instead of merely hours. Dimly these thoughts came to her, and her heart was throbbing once more with its sharp, sick pain, when she came in sight of her grandfather's door.

She started. Perhaps her nerves were overwrought, but a sudden wild instinct of fear seized her as she saw several carriages standing there, and the first on which her eye rested was that of Dr. Preston. Maurice! Had any thing happened to *him*? that was her only thought, as she hurried forward—and came face to face with him in the door-way.

He was standing there with a knot of

two or three gentlemen, all speaking low, all looking as men only look when they have been brought in contact with some great tragedy, and all of whom fell back in sudden, hushed silence when they saw who was approaching. Darcy alone remained perfectly still, and so it was that they met again—he pale and grave with the gravity of some awful certainty; she quivering and trembling all over with surprise and apprehension.

"Maurice," she said, quickly, "what—what is the matter?"

He made a step forward—a pitiful light in his eyes, that was quite apart from tenderness, yet almost as deep—and, taking her hands, led her up-stairs and into the very room where they had parted yesterday. By that time she felt that some terrible blow was hanging over her, and she looked at him in dumb, half-stunned expectancy.

"Tell me what it is!" she said, with a sort of strange calm.

Then he told her—how, she never remembered—that there had been a fatal duel, and that, since she had left the house an hour before, Julian Romney had been brought into it, a corpse. He told her, but she heard him as in a horrible dream, and the sense of unreality only deepened when, before he finished speaking, the door was burst open, and a figure, terrible as the avenger of blood, rushed in upon her; a voice, awful as the voice of final judgment, poured out frantic imprecations on her head, and bade her know herself a murderess!

How the scene ended, she never knew; for all sights and sounds were soon merged into merciful nothingness. Horror, anguish, remorse, came too heavily on the worn brain and exhausted heart. She listened, without answer or appeal, to the avalanche of accusation and reproach that never in all the years of life would cease to haunt her; and then, when others interfered, when her grandfather came and gently forced his wife away, she looked up at Maurice Darcy with an expression of despairing misery which he never forgot, and fell heavily forward in a deep swoon.

BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

LE BEAU CONFÉDÉRÉ.

A ROSY-WARM sunset in the south of France, a white château hanging like an eagle's nest, half-way down a rocky slope, with a sunny valley below it, and a glorious mountain-range behind, a village nestling amid the trees beneath, a gray church-tower looming against the evening sky, a pervading sense of all things soft and fragrant in the atmosphere, and a group—rather social than gay—drinking their after-dinner coffee on the château terrace, with the golden light falling through the leaves and marking many a flickering tracery of spray and tendril on the white dresses which two of the ladies wore.

Foremost in this group was General Aylmer's soldierly figure and handsome face, the latter looking scarcely a day older for all the trouble and difficulty which had encompassed him before he drifted temporarily into this quiet haven of rest. It was right hard, the general thought, that the perversity and folly of other people should fall on his shoulders, as if he had not worries enough and to spare of his own! But, then, his conscience said something to him concerning his own share in the unpleasant matter. He remembered how much averse his daughter had been to the visit which ended so disastrously; he remembered that she had gone to Baltimore only at his solicitation, and, as he was the farthest in the world from a brute, he had put a very sensible constraint on himself, and did not betray, by word or tone, the deep irritation which was perhaps his predominant feeling toward everybody concerned—toward his father-in-law, for the absurd quixotism which had been at the root of the whole *imbroglio;* toward his daughter, for her obstinacy and waywardness; toward the unhappy boy, whose ill-fated passion had hurried him into a bloody grave; but chiefly toward that man who was fighting far away under the tropic sun, with only the hard blows and poor pay of a soldier of fortune—the man whom Valerie Aylmer had never seen since she sank down at his feet on that awful day, the shadow of which was upon her yet.

For no one, looking at her as she leaned over the terrace balustrade in her sweeping, white draperies, could have found one trace of the radiant charm that had kindled the fame of *La belle des belles* amid the orange-groves of distant Louisiana. Not that she was faded, but rather, that a sort of cloud had come over her. The beauty of feature, the clearness of tint, and the softness of glance, were still hers, even despite the long illness which had prostrated body and mind after the shock of Julian Romney's tragical death. But a subtle something had gone from her face, and there were not wanting candid friends who declared that in this very something lay the spirit and essence of her beauty. They made a point of placing the blame of it on her illness; but Valerie herself knew better. She knew that the change had struck

deeper than the mere outside garb of humanity; that an ineffaceable brand had been set upon all the fair freshness of her life; and that the woman who rose up from her sick-bed to bear existence and its stern burden of remorse, could never be one with the girl who had cast herself in passionate despair down upon it. It was in compliance with her own request that, immediately after her recovery, General Aylmer took her abroad. "I want to see Eugene," she said, wistfully, "and I want to leave America so far behind that I need never think of it again. Please, papa, let us go to France." So to France they went—to that sunny Provence where Valerie's ancestors had lived and died for countless generations, and where the young Confederate was supposed to be hard at work surveying a new line of railway. Gerald was perfectly competent to take care of every thing at home; so the general rented a modest château near Eugene's scene of labor, and settled himself for a temporary residence, hoping that the soft air and sunny smiles of this fair region might bring back health to his daughter's pale cheek—the cheek which was such a serious discomfort to a man who had a profound horror of gloom or sadness in any shape. He also considered that perhaps cheerful associates might do something toward making Valerie herself again; so he urged her to write to Alix Rivière, then in Leipsic, and invite her to pay them a visit.

"Poor little Alix! I know she will be glad enough to come," Valerie said, thinking more of the home-sick child than of herself; so she wrote the invitation, which was eagerly accepted—very much to Miss Fane's disgust. For, strangely enough, as it may seem, and yet it was not strange at all, Netta had accompanied her friend abroad. "You need somebody to take care of you," said this experienced friend, "and you must have somebody—for what is a man? I am old enough to do as I please, you know, and, thank Heaven, I have enough fortune left to pay my passage; so you need not say a word, Valerie—I am going." And Valerie, weary and sick, could only smile in the bright, tender face, and answer, "I haven't the least desire to say a word, dear. The mere sight of you is good for me; and I would rather hear this news than any other in the world." So the warm-hearted Louisianian, who was, as she said, old enough to go her own way without molestation, who was an orphan of moderate fortune, and who loved Valerie Aylmer better than she did her own sisters, packed her trunk, and announced her intention so decidedly that nobody even thought of offering any opposition She could not help being disgusted, however, when she heard that Alix Rivière had been summoned to share their retreat; and she absolutely reproached Valerie for yielding the point.

"I know you don't want her yourself," she said, "and the general is foolish enough to think we can be 'cheered' by a child with her head full of *chiffons* and admirers. She will be bored to death here; and then she will bore us to death, and that will be the end of it. I wish you had been more firm, Valerie."

"I don't," said Valerie, in the languid tone which was in such strong contrast to her former brightness; "and you won't either, Netta, when you see her. Her head is no more full of *chiffons* and admirers than yours is; and, although it will be painful, I shall be glad to see her again."

"Painful! Of course it will be painful;" thought Miss Fane, indignantly. "More so than she has any idea herself—poor dear! The general ought to be ashamed of himself; but then I suppose he can't help it—being a man!" But it was a great relief to her anxiety when she saw the shy, gentle little creature in deep mourning, with soft eyes and quiet ways, who made her appearance, instead of the vivacious, self-possessed young lady of the period that her alarmed fancy had pictured. In five minutes, she saw why Valerie had made no opposition to this addition to their circle; and, although Alix had arrived only the day before, they were already good friends as they sat together on the terrace, enjoying the close of that bright afternoon.

There was only one stranger in the party, and he was leaning back against a broken moss-grown sun-dial, while his bright, clear eyes were roving from point to point like

a humming-bird's movements. This was Eugene—*Le beau Confédéré*—who had once made no mean fame for himself in the land from which he was now an exile. Like most of his countrymen, he was of goodly stature, and straight as a pine on a Carolina highland, with the small extremities that betoken good blood, and the indefinable ease of manner which attests good breeding, with a cast of feature that was moderately regular, and a complexion that had been originally florid, but was now bronzed by outdoor life to a healthy brown, save where the white brow lay like a snow-drift under the rich waves of brown hair. This hair matched exactly the eyes that always looked frank and sunny—let the brow above frown ever so darkly—and the long trooper mustache of the Confederate army—a mustache which might perhaps have been more silken, but could not possibly have been more luxuriant. Altogether, the young exile was sufficiently attractive, even on the surface, to make it a matter of little wonder that almost everybody fancied him on first sight, and liked him cordially on second. He was gay and pleasure-loving to a fault, but he had a certain power of concentration not often found united with a mould of character so much inclining to the volatile, which had frequently stood him in good stead. He was also one of a large class who take very little care of themselves, and of whom Fortune seems fond of taking a great deal—who are continually coming to grief in some unforeseen manner, and, like a cat, continually falling on their feet. These are the kind of people for whom lucky chances abound; and who grow to expect them so confidently that they rarely think it necessary to stretch out a hand to make one for themselves—people who are always missing some good thing or other, that a little exertion would have secured to them, and then being rewarded for this culpable carelessness by a still more golden favor showering down upon their graceless heads—people, altogether, with whom it is impossible not to find constant fault, and to whom it is equally impossible not to give warm and honest regard. Plainly, the young ex-colonel of artillery, and present sub-surveyor of civil engineers, had been accustomed, all his life, to obtaining his own way by force of arms, or force of any thing else that was necessary; and plainly, also, he had not changed his habit in changing his position.

After the coffee was disposed of, the whole party had been silent for some time, not so much for absolute want of something to say, as from the pleasant indolence which is apt to seize people occasionally, and keep them quiet despite themselves. In accordance with a special request of the ladies, the two gentlemen were smoking, and only a few desultory remarks were exchanged, as the golden light slowly faded from the gray church-tower with its glittering cross, the valley lay in deep shadow, the mountains wrapped themselves about in purple dusk, the sun went "down behind the western hill to die," and only on the terrace still lingered a rosy Claude light that seemed to throw a tone of sentiment over the group, when the diligence came slowly rumbling past on its way to the village. It was a warm, dusty sort of conveyance, and more than one of the tired passengers looked out at the white château and the pretty home-like scene, as they passed, envying the fair, cool retreat, it may be, and wondering vaguely what aims and interests life held for those to whom so much of life's good things seemed to have fallen.

"What strange, uncomfortable things those diligences are!" said Miss Fane, looking after the heavy vehicle as it rolled on. "I don't think I shall ever grow accustomed to their appearance."

"Yet they seem so much in keeping with every thing else here, that I shall be sincerely sorry when Eugene's railroad comes," said Valerie, without turning round. "I like them!—they look so quaint and old; and travelling must certainly be pleasanter in them than in steamboats and cars, I should think."

"You would not think so, if you had ever tried it," said Eugene, dryly. "However, their day is over—*nous avons changé tout cela.* They have only one merit that I know of—the ease with which one can make acquaintances."

"That is a merit with every thing, so far

as you are concerned, I believe," said the general.

Eugene shrugged his shoulders in a way he had caught from his French companions, and given a certain expression of his own—a way that spoke a great deal of gay *insouciance* without any trouble of words.

"You are perfectly right, sir," he answered. "It's a trick one learns after living a cosmopolitan life some little time. I make it a rule to stand on ceremony with nobody, and you have no idea how amazingly well I find it answer. But then it isn't by any means my monopoly. I thought, for instance, I heard a good deal of talk in Paris about a certain travelling companion with whom you crossed the Channel."

"You are mistaken," said Miss Fane. "The person of whom you are speaking—our friend of the Dover boat, whom we hoped to meet in Paris—was not the general's acquaintance at all, but Valerie's and mine.—You remember, dear?"

"The cripple, you mean?" said Miss Aylmer.

"Yes, the cripple—poor fellow!"

"Who was he?" asked Alix.

"Indeed I don't know," answered Miss Fane. "We none of us found out any thing, excepting that he was a very charming gentleman, though an almost entirely helpless cripple. You can't tell how pitiful it was to see him lifted about like a child; and he was so young, too—not more than thirty-five or six, I am sure."

"Then his voice," said Valerie, breaking in abruptly. "You remember how sweet it was—and his face was so bright and cheerful, whenever a paroxysm of pain was not convulsing it."

"Poor fellow!" said Alix, with all her heart in her tone. "What was his name?—but I forgot you said you did not know. How much he must have reminded you of one of our dear soldiers! Perhaps he was one of them."

"I don't think that is likely," said Miss Fane. "Indeed, I am sure he was not. I think he must have been an Englishman."

"I thought people were only injured that way in war," said Alix, simply, "like poor Frank Russell, who was left for dead in the trenches of Petersburg, you know. What sort of a wound had this—this Englishman received?"

"He was evidently suffering from a spinal injury of some sort," said General Aylmer, "Probably it was only a case of spinal disease," he added, carelessly. "He was very agreeable; and, like Miss Netta, I incline to think that he was an Englishman."

"There is one very good proof of it," said she. "Finding out where we were from, he told me he felt with the Confederacy deeply, and that, if he had not been a cripple, he would have been in our army."

"Being a cripple, he could afford to say so," remarked Eugene, who had lived long enough abroad to become very skeptical of such professions.

"And that he had a brother in the service."

"Indeed! But I am sure he did not mention his name."

"Eugene, you are one of the people whom Sir Walter Scott classes as vulgarly incredulous," said Valerie, turning round with something of the sunset glow still lingering in her eyes. "Good people, the river mists are rising. Suppose we go into the saloon?"

They all agreed with her; though it was hard to leave the sweet outer dusk, with its burnished horizon and silver stars; but when they entered the saloon, where the globe-like lamps showed such bright, clear lustre, and every thing looked so cheerful, they forgot the starlit terrace, and fell to their usual occupations, while Eugene went at once to the open piano.

"Come and sing some, Miss Rivière," he said. "I have heard so much about your voice, that I am prepared for any thing short of astonishment."

Alix went at once—thereby pleasing him much more than she was aware—and, while she sang one of the charming Scotch ballads which she thought likely to suit a taste that could not be severely classical, the young man leaned against the instrument, studying, not the notes that floated in such silver purity past his ear, but the fawn-like eyes and the fair face of the young singer. General Aylmer took a budget of New-Orleans

papers over to a side-table, to open at his leisure, while Valerie and Miss Fane sat down to their needlework, and talked over it in low tones, for the length of the room divided them from the two at the piano.

It was a pleasant room, barring a certain emptiness of aspect, to which the eye grew accustomed by degrees. The floor was of dark, polished wood, with here and there rich Turkey rugs covering portions of it; the furniture, of ebony and damask, was ancient and massive, and, though moth-eaten in parts, still had a certain faded grandeur of its own. Three or four full-length mirrors completed all the original furniture; but there were traces of a new *régime* in the piano—a magnificent Erard—in Valerie's work-table, in a flower-basket which was suspended from the large chandelier, in several Parisian cabinets and tables, in the pleasant easy-chairs, and in the books and journals which were scattered everywhere. Altogether, notwithstanding its quaint, old-fashioned aspect, a pleasanter drawing-room need not have been desired—especially on a soft summer evening when the windows overlooking the terrace were all open, and when moonlight and fragrance, and the soft Provençal air came in, together with the distant murmur of the river.

"Did you like that?" asked Alix, ceasing her song, and glancing up so suddenly, that she quite took her companion by surprise, and absolutely made the young gentleman look confused for the space of a second. "You did not tell me what you preferred; and a ballad suits almost everybody."

"Yes," he said, hastily. "I liked it very much; and—and my taste in music is certainly not very cultivated. Sing something else, won't you?"

"Don't you sing at all yourself?"

"I whistle *Partant pour la Syrie*—that is all."

She laughed. "So that is your taste, is it? I am afraid my sentiment did not suit you, then. I should have sung something martial—only my *répertoire* is not very extensive in that line. I learned Körner's Sword-song the other day, and shocked my *maestro* very much by singing it for him. But—"

She stopped with a suddenness which her companion did not understand, and looked apprehensively toward the other end of the room.

"Well," he could not help asking, "what is the matter?"

"Nothing," she said hurriedly, and speaking very low; "but I forgot—I should not have mentioned that before Valerie. I hope she did not hear me. It would make her think of—of Mr. Romney, who used to sing it; and I would not do that for the world. No; I cannot sing any more just now—after a while, perhaps."

She rose as she spoke, and left the piano, Eugene following, by no means well pleased. He could not understand what a horrible reality that tragedy was to her, which to him had been only a far-off story; nor how vividly her own words had recalled the memory of Julian Romney's living presence. So, although he followed her to the work-table, where Valerie and Miss Fane were sitting, he did not exert himself to be very companionable, and in fact stood gazing absently out of the window while the others talked of the news from the seat of war—the Prusso-Austrian campaign of '66 was in full progress—and especially of the personal items which Charley Hautaine's letters furnished, he being regularly enrolled in the Austrian service. It was Netta's voice at last that roused him from his reverie.

"By-the-by, Eugene," she was saying, "I wonder you never looked upon this war as a chance for action—you who, like Charley, call yourself *condottiere*."

"Because, unlike Charley, I don't see the beauty or utility of having my brains blown out to settle the Schleswig-Holstein question, or determine to whom the Quadrilateral rightfully belongs," answered he, carelessly.

"I thought I heard you not long ago giving your opinion as to whom it rightfully belongs?"

"To Austria? Well and good. Let Austria keep it then—if she can. I have neither concern nor interest in the matter."

Valerie looked up from her work at the young man's half-careless, half-scornful face. "I am sorry to see that you are becoming narrow-minded in your sympathies," she

said. "A few years ago, you would have been all interest and fire in this matter."

"A few years ago, my dear sister, I had a little surplus sympathy and interest to dispose of—now I have none. I doubt much if Ismael measured matters by any other than the *ego* standard; and I and all my kind are Ismaels now. I owe nothing to the world, nothing to civilization, nothing to the rights and wrongs of national quarrels. As an exile and an alien, I stand apart from them all; and who is up or down in the scale of the world, matters little or nothing to me."

Alix's soft eyes looked at him in apparent reproach. Evidently the little lady was not prepared to indorse this creed; and, meeting her glance, Eugene addressed himself to her without a moment's warning.

"You don't agree with me, Miss Rivière. Why not?"

"I—oh, dear! I am sure I said nothing," answered Alix, quite taken aback. "I confess I don't agree with you, Colonel Aylmer; but then—I'm only a woman, you know, and so my opinion is not of any importance."

"I wonder who has been telling you that nonsense?" said the uncivil Eugene. "Of course, your opinion is of importance—of the greatest importance, in fact. Come, let me see if I can't make you agree with me. Why do you think I'm wrong?"

Thus singled out for combat, Alix looked appealingly round at her companions. Argument was not at all her forte, and she always shirked it if she could. "Oh, please don't ask me," she said. "Valerie and Miss Fane—"

"I don't care about hearing the opinion of Valerie and Miss Fane," interrupted the still more uncivil Eugene. "I want your own reasons for thinking me wrong. You must have reasons, you know—or else you could not have an opinion. Come, let me hear them! I want to convince you."

"Suppose I don't care about being convinced?"

"Reasonable people always do care, if they are wrong."

Fenced into a corner in this way, Alix had nothing to do but make the best of the situation, and try to explain herself.

"I don't know," she said, "but it seems to me there's such a thing as abstract right and wrong, isn't there? Well, it seems to me as if right was right, and wrong was wrong, the same now as ever; and I think one ought always to feel with the right, and against the wrong."

"But suppose you don't take interest enough in the matter to care to find out who is wrong and who is right?"

"Then I think you're in a bad way yourself," said she, gravely. "People ought always to take interest; if not, they grow to be narrow, and selfish, and all that sort of thing, you know."

"Then I'm afraid I must bring myself in guilty of being narrow, and selfish, and all that sort of thing!" he said. "Honestly, I don't care a fig who is down or who is up. The nations of the earth stood by silent and apathetic while we were fighting desperately for more than life; and now I should despise myself if I raised a voice, far less a sword, for one of them. In fact, I have no care—I don't pretend to say it is right, for it may be all wrong—but I have no care for any thing save self-interest."

Alix shook her head despairingly. He was all wrong—she felt that instinctively; but she also felt that he was beyond her powers of putting right. "There is such a thing as heroism for the sake of heroism," she said, in last appeal.

"Perhaps there may be for Bayards and Sidneys and the like," answered Eugene, with the scoff of the nineteenth century on his face. "But I am not a Bayard or a Sidney—in fact, I'm only a commonplace man, who thinks a great deal more of himself than of heroism in general, or heroism in particular, either. Don't look so shocked, Miss Rivière! It's all right that you should believe such things, and I wouldn't shake your faith in them for the world—"

"You couldn't," put in she, indignantly.

"*Eh bien!*" said the young cynic, with a shrug of his superior masculine shoulders, "I don't mean to try. But you may convince *me*, if you want to. Will you do so?"

"That is nonsense," said Alix, severely. "You think I have only a woman's foolish, visionary idea; and then you talk of my convincing you, who are evidently as obsti-

nately set in your own way of thinking as possible. It is nonsense!"

"Indeed it isn't," said he, smiling. "Only try. I will be very good, I promise you. And indeed I stand sorely in need of missionary labors."

"I don't think there's a doubt of that," returned she, sincerely. And something in her tone made Eugene laugh so heartily, that at last she was fain to join, and from that moment a league was struck, and they were friends.

CHAPTER II.

SURSUM CORDA.

It was late on the afternoon of the next day, and the sun was throwing long shadows across the terrace, and the formal garden, that lay on one side of it, when Valerie came forth from the château alone, and took her way down to the village.

It was not a long walk, for just beyond the gates a small river flashed over its rocky bed, and was spanned by a bridge—a single arch of heavy masonry—which was the beginning or end, as the case might be, of a crooked street. From this bridge the view of the surrounding country was beautiful. Not so extensive or varied, not even so picturesque a view as might have been gained from any of the heights near by but full of the alternation and contrast, the half-hidden beauties and snatches of distant loveliness which add so much to the charm of a landscape. It was like a sweet, serene idyl of pastoral love and content, to stand on the dark old arch with the bright river flowing beneath, the vine-clad banks on each hand, the purple mountains rising in the background, the golden fields opening sunny vistas only to be abruptly broken by some stretching belt of dark woods, the quiet village with its gray church-tower below, and over all the blue, intensely blue sky, of this most fair and pleasant nook in all the fair and pleasant land of France.

That Miss Aylmer was quite well known in the village was very evident. The blue-bloused men whom she met took their pipes from their mouths to salute her—there was scarcely one of the bright-faced women who had not a "*Bon jour, mademoiselle*"—and the little children, as she passed, rushed tumultuously forward to secure a smile or word of greeting. It had been a strange, foreign scene, this village, to the child of the transatlantic, when she first looked upon it—recalling nothing so much as old pictures that she had seen, or the yet more vivid pictures which imagination had drawn from the word-painting of pens that had dipped themselves in all the warm beauty of the south—but already it all seemed as familiar as if from the knowledge of years. All the tall houses, with their green blinds and over-hanging balconies, all the narrow dark streets, and all the glimpses of green trees and sunny walks, as some garden-door was left open, had grown as natural to her sight as the landmarks of her native city. Even the Place (once the Place Royal, now the Place Impériale), with its restaurants and wine-shops, its shade-trees and benches, together with the beautiful front of its church, had grown to wear a friendly familiarity to her. And there were well-known faces here also—faces that smiled a friendly greeting to the young foreigner, and looked kindly after her, as she crossed the square with her shaft-straight carriage, and sweeping robes of silver gray.

Having made the trifling purchase which had been her ostensible object in coming to the village, Valerie went to the church. It was very cool and dark, and a great contrast to the gay, sunshiny square outside, when she drew back the baize door and met a half-dreamy fragrance of incense floating in the quiet air; for it was a saint's day of obligation, and high mass had been celebrated in the morning. A few candles were burning at the side altars; a few women were telling their beads, as they knelt on the stone floor before them, and a golden nimbus poured from one high window over a palm-crowned martyr's marble head! It was all like and yet unlike that distant cathedral by the Chesapeake, or that more distant and yet dearer one to the exile's yearning heart, by the blue waves of the Mexic Sea!

After she had finished her altar-prayer, Valerie went softly up to the organ-loft, and in a few minutes a flood of melody rolled forth, and seemed to bathe aisle and altar, pictures and statues, in a halo as golden as the falling sunshine. What she played, it is impossible to say; she could not, indeed, have told herself, for the deep tones of the music slumbering in those mighty pipes seemed to mass themselves, as it were, into harmonies, and her hands wandered over "the beautiful cold keys," in chords that might have been only recollections of other strains, but that were for the time steeped in herself, and made as eloquent of her own heart as if that heart had found voice in absolute words. Louder and fuller rolled the tide of melody, swelling under the stone arches and up to the vaulted roof like the solemn chant of a kneeling host, then dying away into low supplication, like the single cry of some fainting soul! It was evidently an accustomed thing to the women below, for they did not even turn their heads, as the grand notes rolled forth; but pursued their devotions with stolid fervor, while wave after wave of harmony swept over them, and the very air seemed vibrating with the passionful power of the music. And, when a stranger who was standing just inside the door stopped an outgoer to inquire concerning the musician, he received only a stare, and a surprised "*C'est mademoiselle la belle Anglaise!*"

This stranger had evidently been strangely attracted by the music, for, moving with extreme difficulty across the floor—he was on crutches—he took his seat immediately below the loft, and quite in the shade of one of its large pillars. There he remained motionless for nearly an hour—remained until the music at last died away like waves ebbing and breaking on a barren shore, and silence settled over the church. He sighed then, strangely and wistfully, and only almost as he did so, a light step sounded at his side, and a shimmering dress swept by him toward the open air.

Gathering up his crutches, he rose and followed as quickly as was possible. But, with all his haste, he would have been too late for Valerie, if she had not paused on the church-steps to say a few words of thanks to the child who had worked the pipes for her. She was on the point of turning away, when that peculiar noise produced by crutches on a stone pavement caused her to look around, and she saw a man coming toward her whom she at once recognized as the invalid-cripple of the Dover boat.

People—especially people of very sensitive nerves—generally turned away, when they met this man, and said to each other, with a shudder: "What a dreadfully painful sight!" But again there were others—especially those who had looked at him long—who felt as if they would ask nothing better than to look at him forever—for to do so was a grander sermon than ever sounded from any pulpit! He was a man who might naturally have been above the medium height, and strongly made; but who was now bent—partly by intense physical pain, partly by the habitual use of crutches—until he seemed to have lost several inches of stature. From the waist his lower limbs hung in semi-paralyzation; and his garments fitted what was once a man's muscular frame, as if hung on the dry bones of a skeleton. It *did* shock unutterably to see this, to watch the hands clinch themselves together, and the head bow itself down upon the chest, in some fierce paroxysm of agony; but there could be nothing of such a feeling, nothing even of pity, when the face raised itself again—stamped though it was with the drear signet of pain!—and the great soul looked at you calmly and bravely through the clear blue eyes. A great soul it was!—few greater have ever lived and striven to endure! Most men, seeing life and all life's uses lie shattered before them—all its bright ambition, all its golden pleasure, all its magic love, killed at one sheer stroke!—realizing that death alone would release from an existence of torture, and that to live in the world was to live forever apart from the world, most men would have closed such a prospect very summarily. And if the courage to end existence—for, let people cant as they will, it *is* a certain sort of courage which suicide requires—had been lacking, there were yet fewer who would

not have sunk into a moody despair that neither hope nor promise could lighten by one ray of cheer. This man had done neither. On the lined face there was a serene light, around the mouth a smile so gentle that "the sweetest lips that ever were kissed" might have envied it, in the eyes a light ever kindly and pleasant, on the brow a patience nothing less than sublime. The face might have been handsome once, but symmetry of outline and freshness of coloring had forever departed now—leaving only the noble power, yet nobler fruits of endurance, that had laid their own charm upon the wasted lines, and sealed them with a beauty far above the beauty of flesh.

As the stranger paused before Valerie, he rested his crutch under his arm, and raised his hand with a sort of cavalier grace that in *him* was at once inexpressibly touching and inexpressibly charming, uncovered a head where the chestnut curls lay in rich profusion, curls so like those that crowned another head—a head which even then might be sleeping beneath the tropic sod—that Valerie's heart gave one quick throb that nearly suffocated her.

"I did not know," he said, in a peculiarly soft and musical voice, "that the invisible musician would prove to be my fair travelling companion. May I not recall myself to her recollection, and at the same time thank her for the pleasure she has afforded me?"

The tone and manner in themselves would have proved a passport to favor; and Valerie at once extended her hand, with a smile.

"I am glad to have afforded you pleasure, and still more glad to see you," she said, simply and cordially. "This is a very pleasant surprise. I had scarcely hoped we should meet again."

The stranger smiled slightly.

"I was sure we should—some time," he said. "But I, too, scarcely hoped that it would be so soon, or so unexpectedly. I congratulate you, however, on finding this lovely provincial nook. It is a favorite resort of mine; and I felt, when I arrived last night, a sense of ease and refreshment in the very air."

"Last night!" repeated Valerie, with a slight start of surprise. "In the diligence? Excuse me, but it seems so strange!—we saw it as it passed our château, and it made us all think of you. We were talking of you, and wondering about you for some time afterward."

"Your château!" said the stranger, and it was now his turn to look surprised. "Do you mean the château just beyond the river—the one belonging to the De Launay family? Really, I consider this quite singular, for I was very much attracted by the appearance of the group on the terrace, and asked old Tonsard who was living there. He told me an English family."

"They seem to consider us English here," Valerie said, apologetically. "It seems impossible to make them understand differently; and in truth I am not very sorry: I am afraid that, if they knew we were Americans, they might consider us Yankees," she added, gravely.

"There would be no danger of that, if they had ever seen any of the latter," said her companion, smiling amusedly. "And you are living here, then?"

"Yes, we are living here—temporarily, at least—and it enables me to say that we shall be very glad to see you at the château," she added—"for I suppose you mean to spend some time in our neighborhood."

It was a strange invitation to be given so frankly, by a young girl to a man, of whom she knew nothing; but the old hospitable habit of her Southern rearing was strong upon Valerie; and then she felt so old and grave, so separated by a deep gulf from her girlhood and all connected with it, that she would scarcely have hesitated if the case had been much more extreme. The stranger looked a little astonished—he evidently had not expected such a prompt waiving of ceremony—but the sudden expression that swept over his face proved how much he was charmed by the grave, gentle dignity with which it had been done. Yet, he did not answer for a moment. Indeed, he hesitated for several moments before speaking; then it was rather slowly:

"You are very kind, Miss Aylmer. Ah!—" for Valerie started—"you see I

know your name. I heard your servant mention it before I saw you, though I think I should have known you instinctively. I have heard a great deal of you, and I had a very fair picture of you in my mind."

He had heard a great deal of her! Surely there was nothing surprising in that. Scores of people, whom she had never seen, might have said the same thing; and scores whom she had seen might readily have mentioned her name to this stranger, and yet—and yet there was no reason for it at all, but she gazed at him with very startled eyes.

"You have heard of me?" she repeated. "That is very strange, for I—I hardly think we have any acquaintances in common."

He looked at her with something very sad and wistful in his deep-blue eyes. They were walking slowly across the Place by this time, and more than one of the villagers, who did not understand the unknown tongue, noticed how singularly preoccupied both of them were. Yet there was nothing more than usual in the stranger's voice and manner when he answered:

"You are right. We have no acquaintances in common; but I think we possess at least one friend. I did not mean to offer at once the only claim which I can advance on your kindness; but—well, perhaps it is best after all. Mademoiselle, Maurice Darcy is your cousin, and it has made amends for much misfortune in my life that he is also my brother."

The simple words were spoken with so much deep and evident feeling that, for a second, Valerie scarcely realized the fact which they stated. Then a dim memory swept over her of having heard something like this before; of Madame Vacquant having once said in the ages long ago, when she did not care for Maurice, that he had a brother—a half-brother—who was an imbecile, or a cripple, or something of the sort. And now she knew that this was the man. It came over her with a rush—a sudden, indescribable sensation of almost joy. It was something belonging to him—something that was his—some link between them, severed though they were—and so there was more gladness than surprise in the tone that said quickly:

"You!—you his brother?"

"Yes," the cripple answered, almost sadly. "You would scarcely think it, but I am his brother."

They were passing just then under the shade of a tall, dark house with overhanging balconies, where only one or two children were playing in the door-way; but even these looked surprised to see Valerie pause and turn to her companion—her hand extended, and her eyes shining with the first gleam of pleasure that had flickered into them for many months.

"I greeted you as a stranger a little while ago," she said, in a low, quivering tone, "but now I bid you welcome as Maurice's brother. I am very, very glad to know you. Tell me something about him. Is he well?—is he happy?"

"He was well when I heard from him last," the other replied. "But—do you think he is likely to be happy?"

"I hoped so," she answered, quickly. "And, indeed, why not?"

"Why not?" It was something of indignation which came into those honest blue eyes. "Why not? Mademoiselle, you can ask me that?"

She smiled faintly, for she knew what he meant, and it seemed strange to her that any one should think she had still any power over the man who had left her with such cold scorn.

"Yes," she said; "I asked it in all sincerity. There is not, as far as I know, any reason why he should not be happy."

"You think that he—he of all men—could cast off feeling like a worn glove?"

"No," she answered, a little drearily. "I only think—I only know—that he is what few men are—his own master. I am sure that, if any feeling troubled him, he would put it down under his foot, and it would never stir again. Therefore I hope that he is happy—indeed, I can scarcely doubt it. I only trust, for your sake, that he will soon return. Does he speak of doing so?"

Her companion shook his head. "He does not speak of it at all. I hardly think he will return until the fate of the empire is decided—one way or another. He is a born

soldier—my poor Maurice!—and I would not wish him other than where he is, if I could only be with him. Sometimes I am ungrateful enough to feel it hard that he is there, while I, his younger brother, whose place should be at his side, am here."

He spoke almost unconsciously, more as if thinking aloud than talking; and then he caught an astonished look on Valerie's face which made him wonder what he had said to excite it. Her next almost involuntary words enlightened him:

"His younger brother! Ah, pardon me" (for she suddenly felt her own rudeness), "but it seems—"

"Very strange, no doubt," he said, concluding her unfinished sentence. "But, then, it is true, you know. My mother was our father's second wife; and I am much younger than Maurice. Indeed, I fear you will hardly believe me when I tell you that I am only twenty-five."

Only twenty-five! She was so much startled, so unfeignedly shocked by this statement, that for more than a minute she could only look at him in awe-struck surprise. Only twenty-five—and bearing upon the shoulders of sixty the face of wellnigh forty!

"Only twenty-five!" she repeated, as if by an irresistible impulse. "Oh, how cruel God has been to you!"

The cripple lifted his hat—reverentially, as if he had stood upon a sanctuary threshold.

"His will be done!" he said, calmly.

And in the act and tone was that which humbled her to the dust. There, in the wreck of years and youth, with his dead hopes clinging round him, and the sad vision of his past life rising before him, this man could say, with such sublime simplicity, "His will be done;" while to her all God's bounteous gifts had turned to ashes, and denial of Him in her heart had almost come, because He seemed to deal hardly with the human needs and human impulses Himself had created!

"I am rebuked," she said, bending her head with strange humility. "And yet I, too, have striven to feel that, for I too have suffered! Oh, if you would only teach me a little at least of the patience which can enable you to bear so much!"

He laid his thin, wasted hand down upon hers. She never afterward forgot that scene—the last golden sunshine streaming through the linden-boughs, or the light on Gaston Darcy's face.

"We can all of us learn the patience to endure any thing that He pleases to send," he said. "But that patience is born of love and trust."

CHAPTER III.

THE SILVER LINING.

Perhaps it was only an exemplification of that most merciful law in all God's merciful providence—the law of calm succeeding tempest—which gave some very quiet and peaceful days to the château, after this—some days which came very unexpectedly, but were nevertheless welcomed and enjoyed as people only welcome and enjoy things of which they have been long deprived. At General Aylmer's hospitable entreaty, Mr. Darcy left his village quarters to make a temporary abode with them; Eugene came and went, bringing his gay young engineer friends for short visits, which they enjoyed amazingly; Alix brightened into her old self, and lilted like a mocking-bird about the quaint old garden and shady courts; the few châteaux in the neighborhood condescended to recognize the newcomers and exchange civilities: while Netta Fane, who was watching all this very suspiciously, took heart and comfort when she saw how well Valerie bore it. Yet in truth if she had only known it, Valerie scarcely heeded it at all. The tide of life which suddenly flowed in upon them was very pleasant to every one else; so, even in her own mind, she did not wish the conventual seclusion of the first month or two back again; but, naturally enough, the bright faces and the gay tones, the laughter and the happiness, jarred upon her; and she drew herself away from it, not outwardly, but inwardly, which is, after all, the better and more complete way. She devoted herself to Gaston

Darcy, for the sweet, subtle charm of his beautiful patience, his sunny, even nature, became daily more powerful and more potent for good. But the others felt instinctively that, though she was among, she was not of them. No one ever knew her fail in a duty of courtesy or hospitality; but beyond that there was a barrier which seemed to bar further progress. In fact, this was a transition period of Valerie's life, a period when sorrow threatened to deepen into melancholy, and natural remorse into morbid gloom, and when it was well for her that there chanced to be a monitor near at hand to speak gentle counsel and offer kind encouragement. The first shock of stunned grief was over, the first horror of self-reproach had given way to calmer reason, but a weary, listless apathy, a deadened torpor had crept over her, numbing her brain, and chilling her heart into a lethargy from which she felt little desire to rouse herself. Gaston Darcy never did a better deed than when he broke in upon this darkness with his life which was more eloquent than many words. And Valerie listened to him as she would not have listened to any other on earth, for he was not only Maurice's brother, he was not only saint-like, in the perfection of his faith and resignation, but he spoke "as of knowledge." That was the great secret of it. He had suffered. He did not preach as those who, from regions of tranquil security, exhort the quivering soul to hope and courage, but as one who had traversed the dark valley before reaching the heights beyond. Love and trust! The words came to her dimly, with a far-off sound, but yet she felt their glory and beauty out of the very depths of her wretchedness. They had been mere names to her, as, alas! to so many of us, symbols of something transcendental and unattainable—something only half understood, and wholly unregarded, but now—ah, now human love came as guide and teacher of that love which is divine. For, after all, it seems as if these poor hearts of ours are only to be trained upward by props, as if our earthly affections are only the steps by which we climb slowly toward the higher affection that is waiting to absorb all, as if we are taught the knowledge of love by its mortal objects, only that, when they fall away, we may look into our hearts, and, recognizing their infinite capacity, their boundless capability of passion, learn the best lesson of mortality—the lesson that finite love is only given to show the depth and mystery of love which is Infinite.

Slowly and by degrees, this knowledge came to Valerie, softening her passionate repining, lightening her dull, heavy grief into the calm of something like resignation. Yes, her earthly love had at least done her this service—it taught her the depths of her own nature as she had never even imagined them before, it made her realize the possibility of abnegation, and sacrifice, and self-forgetfulness, and those like things which the world deems veriest folly, but on which the angels of God look with loving eyes; it waked her from trifles to realities, it killed utterly all the old leaven of vanity and pride, and gave instead that sad, bitter humility which is more fruitful of good than all else whatever, save only God's grace. She accepted the end which had come to all her hopes very quietly—never once dreaming of rebellion after that awful blow which had showed her all at once the depth and darkness of the gulf on which she had trifled so long. She!—how should she dare to dream of happiness, with the guilt of blood upon her soul; for would not Julian Romney have been among the living if her face had never crossed his path? And would not that memory rise up to haunt her if she could forget it long enough to love and be loved again? No, Maurice was right—right to leave her coldly, almost cruelly, as he had done. She was no fitting wife for him, and the end was better as it was. He had done well to scorn her, well to think he could never trust her again—she deserved it all. Now, at least, she could offer her love, her life, her very self, perhaps, some day, in expiation of the bitter wrongs she had wrought, of the cruel use to which she had put her many gifts. Something of this was written on her face one day, as Netta Fane watched it at benediction; and when they rose to leave the church, the twilight gloom of which was scarcely dissipated by the myriad tapers shining like stars on the high

altar, and, glancing back from the silver monstrance which had just been lifted in blessing, she said, abruptly:

"You know the proverb about every cloud having a silver lining—well, I think that perhaps you will find the lining to yours after a while, Valerie."

But she was not prepared for the shrinking start which Valerie gave.

"Hush!" she said, and her voice thrilled with a strange awe in it through the falling dusk. "Never say that again, Netta—never! If it were only for myself, do you think I should not have found it long ago in the conviction that I have deserved every thing? But for—for—"

Since the day of his death, she had never spoken Romney's name, and it was wellnigh impossible to do so now. But Netta knew what she meant, of whom she was thinking, and Netta gave a great gasp over the knowledge. It was hard for her not to speak her mind out on the subject; a much greater self-denial than Valerie ever appreciated; for, with all the zeal of a thorough partisan, Miss Fane directed the whole weight of her indignation against the man who had been mad enough and foolish enough to throw his life down at a woman's feet. "He deserved nothing better than to be shot!" thought this stanch friend and advocate; "I only wish I dared tell Valerie exactly what I think of him!" But Miss Fane was discretion itself—at least on important occasions. She knew that she did *not* dare to do any thing of the kind; that she would only make matters worse, and that Valerie needed to recover the healthful tone of her mind by slow degrees; so she only said: "Look how the lights gleam from the château! They are very home-like and pleasant, don't you think so? And yonder is Alix on the terrace, I see, with somebody else in attendance. Eugene must have arrived."

"There is nothing more likely," Valerie said, glancing in the direction indicated, as they crossed the bridge. "Eugene does not seem to find the least difficulty about getting off duty; and his visits are certainly much more frequent since Alix came."

"Yes," answered Miss Fane, with her dry, shrewd smile. "I think I can congratulate you on your future sister-in-law. There are not many people who are as fortunate as you will be in this respect."

"You mean—?"

"I mean, of course, that Master Eugene is in earnest at last, and that Alix seems by no means averse to his suit."

Valerie looked at her friend as if a new and strange idea had been suddenly presented to her. "I never thought of that before," she said, simply. And the remark, which was a very true one, proved in itself how deep her preoccupation had been, how little her real self had mingled with the people among whom she moved.

There is a great deal in having the eyes opened to an affair of this kind, however; and, now that Valerie's were couched, she saw how just Netta's conclusions were. She had seen Eugene so often in love, that it had rather grown to be his normal state in her eyes; but there was no mistaking the fact that this was something more than a commonplace love-affair with him. She watched him that night—for of course it proved to be himself who had been loitering on the terrace with Alix, in the summer dusk—and realized with amazement how blind she had been. Yes, there was not a doubt of it; the boy was in earnest at last. *La belle des belles*, who had seen so much of love in her life, was the most unlikely person in the world to doubt the sign-tokens of the familiar passion—the last person in the world not to understand the quick lights and shadows which chased each other over the young man's face at a word from Alix's lips, or the tender gleam in his eyes whenever they rested on that dainty brown head bent over the board where Mr. Darcy was vainly trying to teach her the mystery and science of chess. It was quite hopeless, however; and Eugene was very glad when she laid herself open to an ignominious checkmate, thus ending the game, and giving him an opportunity to bear her off to the piano, while the general took her vacated seat. Then Valerie still watched them, with a growing wonder over her own previous obtuseness. It was all so plain!—all Alix's pretty tyranny and Eugene's devoted slavery! So plain that, as she looked, a very pleasant sketch of the

future rose before her. Alix and Eugene would marry and settle here, the general might go back to Louisiana, if he wanted to, but she and Netta would remain. A wing of the château could be fitted up for them, so that when the others took flight—as of course they would very often—their life would flow on all the same. She fancied herself niched in this quiet nook while the great world roared and rushed beyond, and dreamed a life something like the lives led by the châtelains of old time, a life of serene contemplation, yet active with good works, a life in which she saw the children she would teach, the sick she would attend, the charity she would bestow, and, more than all, the peace she would win. For that, after all, was the great point—peace, rest, repose of conscience, quiet of heart, all those things which we possess in anticipation or in retrospection, but rarely indeed in the reality of the present. Valerie went on dreaming of them, however, in time to those exquisite strains of the Moonlight Sonata which Alix was softly playing; and then she started, when, with a crash, the nimble fingers glided into the chords of some martial air for which Eugene had preferred a petition, and smiled as she realized how entirely all her fabric of thought had been built on a probability—a probability which others besides herself discerned, however; for, when she looked up, Gaston Darcy laughed and said: "Did that abrupt change of measure startle you? For my part, I think I should have asked for a wedding march—I am very fond of Mendelssohn's."

Meanwhile, Eugene, who was not at all an indeterminate sort of person, but always knew his own mind perfectly well, had very little objection to anybody or everybody's seeing that he was thoroughly in earnest, and that it would be no fault of his if Alix did not consent to share his adventurous fortunes. He did not entertain much fear of the result, either; for what could be easier than to teach this gentle, confiding little creature the lesson of love which she seemed born to learn? He could not help thinking, too, what a fortunate thing it was that he had not married any one of half a dozen girls with whom he had been on the brink of matrimony in the past, but that Fate had reserved him for such a happy fortune as this. "She suits me as nobody ever suited me before," he thought. "She is a perfect little pearl—so exquisitely dainty and refined, that it is impossible that she could be improved. There is such an air of repose, too, in every thing she does; and she never offends by a loud tone or an awkward movement, like these dreadful *prononcé* women who have become the fashion of the day. Her profession is the only drawback, and I would soon put an end to all that. It is hard enough to think that she ever was subjected to such a trial, my poor little flower!"

The poor little flower, however, was by no means of his way of thinking on this point, and many were the battles to which their difference of opinion gave rise. "You are illiberal; you have no culture," Alix would say, indignantly. "You don't know any thing about how an artist feels toward art. I love music for music's sake, and not for the fame and the noise you talk about. The people who go to hear me sing don't think of *me*—they think of my voice, and that is what I think of too."

"I don't care what they think of," Eugene would retort; "but it is not a fit place for you. And if I had been your—your brother, you never should have set your foot on any stage under heaven—no, not for an hour!"

"I am very glad you were not my brother, then," Alix would say. And, as Eugene could not honestly declare that he was sorry, the matter generally ended there. Apart from this subject of dispute, they might be said to get on very smoothly, however; and matters certainly looked very much as if Valerie might soon be called upon to welcome a sister-in-law whom she could thoroughly love and approve—a gift of fortune which, as Miss Fane very sensibly said, not many people are lucky enough to possess.

This evening, like many evenings which had gone before, was a very golden one to the young Confederate. He had Alix all to himself, with nobody to interfere, to distract her attention, or to make him jealous. The two gentlemen playing chess, and the two ladies stitching away at their needlework,

were as much apart from the two at the piano, as if an ocean instead of a room had divided them; and, although Alix sung a snatch of song now and then, it was impossible not to perceive that music played a very small part in their mutual entertainment. They were both very agreeably engaged, and Eugene at least was in Arcadia—but, even into Arcadia, disturbances sometimes come; and his, if he had only been able to foresee it, was not far off. When he bade Alix good-night at the end of the corridor that evening, he did not know that he was also bidding adieu to all the tranquil charm of their intercourse—and perhaps it was as well for him that he did not. At least we are told to be thankful that "Heaven from all mortals hides the book of fate," and there is no doubt but that Eugene's slumbers would scarcely have been so sound, his dreams scarcely so sweet that night, if he had even faintly guessed what the next day had in store for him.

Yet the next day passed away very much like most days until near its close. The ladies spent the morning on the terrace, trifling over their sewing and embroidery; while Mr. Darcy and Eugene read aloud to them by turns from a volume of Béranger's which the latter had brought. "You talk about poetry," he said, one day. "I will show you something which is worth all that stuff of Lamartine and Hugo put together!" So he made his appearance with those stirring verses which in their day electrified all young France. They did a good deal to electrify the company that heard them that morning, and the ringing measure was still echoing in Valerie's mind when she went to dress for dinner. It reminded her of Hautaine, who had once been very fond of Béranger, too; and as she fastened her collar, and smoothed her hair, she could not forbear a sigh over the gallant young free lance who had loved her so long and so well. "Poor Charley! I wonder where he is, and what he is doing?" she thought. "I wonder if he has quite forgotten me; and I wonder, too, if he has come to any harm in these dreadful battles? I am sure Netta must be very uneasy. I will ask her about him this evening."

So that evening, when they were alone on the terrace, while the gentlemen were still lingering over their wine, and Alix had wandered down into the garden, Valerie mooted the subject. "I have not heard you speak of Charley for a long while, Netta. Have you heard nothing from him, or—or about him?"

"Nothing whatever," answered Miss Fane, sadly. "I have not spoken of it, Valerie, because I did not care to distress you; but I am very seriously uneasy, and neither the general nor Eugene gives me much encouragement. The people at home look to me for news of him, and what can I say?—We have not heard from him since Sadowa, you know."

"But we would have heard if—if any thing had befallen him."

Netta shook her head. "Hardly. He was a foreigner, and so entirely unknown. Your father wrote to Vienna the other day, and, until we hear from there, I still venture to hope. He may have been only wounded, or—or something of the sort. I have come to counting on that now."

"Yes," Valerie said, almost under her breath—for they both knew only too well what "counting on that" meant—and then she laid her head down on the stone balustrade. "God help us!" was her cry. "It is so terrible! The shadow of blood seems upon all things. The whole earth is rocking and ringing with the tramp of armed men; and, after hearing of battles and sieges all day, I dream at night of wounded men and ghastly corpses, of blood, and carnage, and death, until I wake up sick and shuddering."

"And the effect is very visible," said Miss Fane. "Do you know that, instead of regaining your healthful looks, you are daily growing more pale, more hollow-eyed, more unlike yourself?"

"No," was the indifferent answer, "I did not know, but I can believe it."

"Valerie," said her friend, abruptly, "you are thinking, not of Prussia, but of Mexico."

"And how can I help it?" said Valerie, wearily. "Did not I send him there? If he is killed, will it not be my work? Will

not his blood rest on my head, as much as —as the other does? You may be sure of one thing, Netta—it is no lovesick regret that I am nursing, but a terrible fear, which haunts me night and day. I would willingly covenant never to look on Maurice Darcy's face again, if he were once safely out of danger."

"Child, such men as he are never out of danger."

"But no other danger would be my fault —no other would make his death my work. You don't know what remorse is, Netta—indeed, how should you? But, if you had ever suffered for one hour what I have suffered for months past, you would not wonder that I pray to be spared its increase, at any cost."

Her friend looked at her wistfully. Then a sudden impulse made her lay her hand down on that bowed head. "Your prayers will be heard," she said, almost solemnly. "I am sure of that. God tries us severely, sometimes, but never beyond our strength. And He is not like us poor mortals—He never forgets mercy in justice."

As she spoke the last words, the gentlemen stepped through one of the dining-room windows, and came across the terrace to join them. General Aylmer and Mr. Darcy walked slowly in advance—movement was very painfully difficult to the latter—while Eugene followed with the careless, swinging tread that took him over ground so easily, and would have proved a fortune to a professional pedestrian. One glance was enough to satisfy him that the terrace lacked its chief attraction; so he sauntered off to the garden, whistling, as he went, his favorite gallop. Mr. Darcy sank into one of the chairs which were always ready placed, and laid his crutches on the grass beside him.

"This is really charming," he said, with his pleasant smile. "I never grow weary of the beautiful view we have from this spot; and I cannot help fancying that our group is no inconsiderable addition to it. We make a very picturesque effect, I am sure; and it is only a great pity that Maurice is not here to sketch us."

He often spoke of his brother thus—always with a lingering accent of tenderness on the name—and Valerie had grown quite accustomed to the allusions. She rarely answered them, however, but, as in the present instance, left some one else to do so.

"Your brother must be a very fine artist," said Miss Fane. "I have heard a great deal of his pictures—though I have only seen one of them."

"You have seen one, then?" said Mr. Darcy, lifting his head, which a spasm of pain had lowered while she spoke. "What was it?"

But to this simple question, Miss Fane made no reply. She found that she had betrayed herself unwittingly, and she directed a half-frightened, half-apologetic glance at Valerie, who, after a moment's hesitation, answered in her stead:

"It was a picture which Maurice painted for grandpapa, and which I have, that Netta has seen—a portrait of myself."

"Indeed!" Mr. Darcy's gentle eyes, which were yet very keen ones, looked at her intently for a moment; then he said, with a smile: "I wonder if Maurice did you justice?"

"You shall see the portrait if you wish," said she, quietly. "Some day, I will have it brought down to the saloon for your inspection."

"I propose an amendment to that," said her father. "Have it brought now, and we can inspect it while drinking our coffee."

"Here?"

"Why not? Do you keep it in any inaccessible place?"

"No; certainly not," she answered, flushing slightly. Then she turned to the servant who was handing coffee: "Baptiste, go and tell Fanchette to give you the picture which is in my dressing-room. It has only been out of its packing-case once —for Netta to see—since we came here," she added, turning again to Gaston.

Before many minutes elapsed, Baptiste reappeared, bearing the canvas, which was only cabinet size, and, therefore, no great burden. By Miss Fane's direction, he paused some distance from them and held

it aloft. After two or three shiftings of position, a good light was finally secured, and then the glowing beauty, with her dreamy eyes and brilliant tints, looked down from her curtained opera-box upon them.

"Now; is it not admirable?" cried Netta, triumphantly. "Is it not herself?"

The general rose and came forward—adjusting his eye-glass as he did so. He was an excellent art-critic, and they all felt that a certain responsibility rested upon his decision. Perhaps he felt this himself; for, when he came within proper range of the picture, he said "Hum!" in a way peculiar to him, a way as of one startled into reluctant admiration; and then he stood still, and gazed intently on Maurice Darcy's handwork.

"It is excellent," he said at last, rather slowly. "I had no idea that Captain Darcy was nearly so good an artist. Not that I ever saw any of his productions; but still—those flesh tints are singularly transparent," added he, breaking suddenly into criticism. "I never saw any thing better, although he has too much warmth of coloring—a sort of Gorgione dash which is hardly—"

"You forget that Valerie's complexion was not then what it is now," interposed Valerie's friend, rather indignantly.

"I beg your pardon," said the general, courteously, "but I was not thinking of Valerie's complexion at all; I was dealing with the picture, *as* a picture. The foreshortening is admirable, too. The only thing, in fact, to which it is possible to object, is that heightening effect obtained by means of—"

"But as a portrait, sir," said Netta, who was terribly uncultivated, and cared nothing whatever about tints, tones, and effects. "What do you think of it as a portrait?"

"I think it is grossly flattered," said the general, who did not fancy such remorseless interruption.

But meanwhile Gaston Darcy had not spoken. He sat quite motionless in his chair, gazing so earnestly, so almost mournfully on the canvas, that at last Valerie laid her hand softly on his arm.

"And what do you think of Maurice's work?" she asked, as he turned to her.

There was a moment's pause—a pause in which he looked from original to copy, and from copy back to original. Then—

"What do I think of it?" he repeated, sadly. "I think there is a heart-throb in every stroke."

Before the bright blood had died away from Valerie's face—the blood which quickened her resemblance to the picture till even the general could have found no further fault with the Gorgione dash—she heard a quick cry, whether of joy or pain it was impossible to tell, and Netta Fane's white dress went by her like a flash.

They all turned simultaneously in the same direction, and there, coming along the terrace toward them, was a soldierly-looking man in undress uniform, with his arm in a sling—a man whom Netta was eagerly bounding to meet; and as they looked she threw her arms round him with these glad words of welcome:

"Charley!—my own dear Charley! Is it indeed you?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE HIDDEN SKELETON.

It was indeed Charley Hautaine—but Charley Hautaine looking the mere shadow of his former self. A hollow-eyed, wasted ghost, bearing the traces of long illness on his pale face, where the eyes shone unnaturally large and dark, and of a painful wound in the disabled arm, which hung useless in its sling.

When Netta's greeting had a liittle subsided, he found General Aylmer's cordial welcome ready for him, together with Valerie's outstretched hands and eager voice.

"Oh, Charley, dear friend, I am so glad to see you again!" she said.

"But, my poor boy!" cried Netta, hovering between tears and laughter; "how badly he looks!—And your arm, Charley!—what is the matter with your arm?"

"A bullet is, or was, the matter with

it," said Charley, laughing as people do laugh in the very midst of agitation. "A souvenir of Sadowa—I only wish it had been the worst!"

"And what could be worse?" asked she, breathlessly.

"An attack of fever in a prison hospital. Don't you think so?"

Then they overwhelmed him with a storm of questions. Where had he been?—what had he been doing?—had he been taken prisoner?

"I am a prisoner on parole now," he replied.

"A parole that don't signify much," said the general. "The war is virtually ended."

"I suppose so," the other answered. "It is just my luck to be always caught on the losing side! I *did* want to thrash those Prussians, if only to feel myself once more having the best of it—but Fate was against me, as well as against Austria! I have heard, however, that sympathy is a balm for every ill—and, I hope, I am sure of that here."

"Sure of any amount of it," said Valerie, warmly. "But come! we must not keep you standing here, and you looking so pale and tired. We are just taking our coffee; but I shall order something more substantial for you."

"I have already dined," he said; "and, if you will allow me, I will only join you in your coffee. How delightfully pastoral you look!"

"Yes, we have chanced upon a pleasant home," she said, as she led him forward to the spot where Mr. Darcy and the coffee, Baptiste and the picture, had been left to keep each other company. The latter was amusing himself by an open-mouthed stare at the stranger whom the whole family had rushed to greet in such an effusive manner, while the former was sitting quite still, with his head bent forward on his chest in the manner usual with him.

"We have another—a new friend with us," said Valerie, as they advanced.

And, just as she spoke, the cripple slowly lifted his head, and turned his face to them. If that face had been one from the dead, its effect upon Charley Hautaine could scarcely have been more startling. For a second he recoiled, and stood gazing mutely—a mingled astonishment and anguish in his eyes—then he uttered one cry so low and hollow that, involuntarily, Valerie's hand fell from his arm.

"My God!"

The pause of the next moment might almost have been felt, it was so deep, and yet so short. So short that General Aylmer and Netta had not reached them when, after making a sign to Baptiste for his crutches, Mr. Darcy rose and limped forward.

"Come with me a moment," he said to Hautaine. Then to Valerie, "You will excuse us—we shall not be long."

And the first thing she knew, she was standing alone, gazing in dumb amazement at the two men slowly moving away. It was something more than strange, such conduct; but still she managed to quiet the astonishment of the others, when they came up, or at least to restrain its expression. They were evidently old friends, she said, and Mr. Darcy had probably something of importance to tell Charley. They had said they would not be long. But there was an awkward sense of mystery in the air, despite this plausible statement; and very little use in trying to conceal that they each felt curious, far more curious than they would have liked to acknowledge. Conversation languished, for, while each one strove to preserve an appearance of dignified unconcern, each in reality watched anxiously the two who had paused not far off, and were talking earnestly. At least Mr. Darcy was talking earnestly. His companion listened with bent head, and only occasionally uttered a few words, which the lifted hand of the other more than once stayed. But at last the pantomime came to a close, and, turning, they walked slowly back, side by side, to the group waiting for them.

"I hope you did not think I meant to abduct your cousin, Miss Fane," said Mr. Darcy, in his usual tone, as he relapsed into his former seat, and allowed Valerie to relieve him of his crutches; "but we are such old friends, Charley and I, that I almost feel as if I had the first claim upon him."

"Old friends!" repeated the general, a little curiously. "Why, how did you two ever chance to know each other?"

"You forget that Charley was in the navy, papa," said Valerie, coming to the rescue; "and naval officers know everybody, I believe."

"Gaston and I met in Italy, before the war—our war, I mean," said Charley, who looked many degrees more pale and weary than when Netta had caught sight of him coming along the terrace, twenty minutes before.

"You are to drink a cup of coffee immediately," said Valerie, turning to him. "I sent Baptiste to order some of Jules's very best; and here he comes with it—for once, just in time.—Papa, don't you think it ought to have a strengthening dash of brandy in it?"

"Something more than a dash, I should say," the general answered. "Come with me, Charley, and I will give you something better for your nerves and your looks than even Jules's famous coffee."

"I believe I prefer the coffee, sir," said Hautaine, with a glance at the hand which offered it—a very pretty hand, as all Miss Aylmer's admirers had long since acknowledged.

"Pshaw!" said the unromantic father. "You can drink that afterward, if you choose, but I insist on the Otard first. I have some that is capital."

"Go, Charley. You can come back for your coffee," Valerie said.

And, with only tolerable grace, Charley went. He looked so much better when he came back—thus proving the efficacy of the general's prescription—that Miss Aylmer smiled approvingly, as she dropped a lump of sugar in his cup and handed it to him by way of reward.

The cloud seemed somewhat to pass away from them after this, and they sat and talked very pleasantly in the rosy sunset—pleasantly to outward appearance, that is; but Valerie noticed, with a woman's quick observation, how deeply Hautaine's brow contracted whenever his glance fell on Gaston Darcy's bent frame—the frame of an old man as he sat drawn together in his large arm-chair—and, when the first one of the constantly-recurring spasms of pain seized him, Charley pushed back his chair, as if by an uncontrollable impulse, turning his eyes away, as he said, with a gasp:

"I cannot bear it! It is too horrible!"

"You will grow used to it after a while—we have done so," said Valerie, softly. "And he bears it so patiently."

"It is not much to bear," said Gaston, who had caught her words, low as they were. And he raised his face, still lined and distorted from agony. "I have not learned to suffer and be still yet—that is all."

"Don't slander yourself, Mr. Darcy," said Netta, quickly. "I have never heard you utter even a groan."

"No—I hope not. But it is quite as inconsiderate to manifest pain by gesture; and really I do not suffer—very much."

He hesitated a moment before uttering the last two words—words which were almost sublime. They all felt it; and, from some vague instinct, they were all silent. Nobody contradicted the assertion, though they each knew that, but for the mighty and beneficent aid of opium, he could scarcely have borne for one day the weight of bodily anguish laid upon him. "Let him take as much morphine as he pleases," a noted physician had once said to his brother. "Its influence will outlast his life."

Then Charley began to ask questions of the home people, and by degrees the conversation drifted to the scenes and the friends they had left behind in the distant native land, so that, as the shadows lengthened, as the golden light faded from the gray tower and gilded spire of St. Roche, and the soft evening shades began to close about them, they almost forgot Gaston Darcy's presence, so quiet and still he lay back in his chair, while over the wide waste of tossing water they went back for a space to the old scenes, and the bright sky which looks down as lovingly on desolation as it ever looked on peace! Familiar names flashed from lip to lip; allusions, so slight that they were almost trivial, brought the quick tear, the ringing laugh. A word or a tone was sufficient to summon up pic-

tures on which their eyes would never gaze again. The charm of the old, glad, careless existence swept over them; but it was with that pang, at once so unutterably tender and so unutterably bitter, which stirs within us as we stand by the newly-made grave of some fair creature whose grace and beauty, gone out of our life, have left it forever desolate! But even as the smiles of the dead come back to us, at once to agonize and to soothe, so that halcyon Long Ago of themselves and their country started out of the tomb at their bidding—so the laughing eyes and the happy voices came across the gulf of time and the ocean of blood!—so the green leaves (greener than they will ever be again!) rustled over their heads once more—so the golden sunshine (more golden than any sunshine of to-day!) slept on their path—so the fair faces and gallant forms (there are none so fair or so gallant left!) rose out of their dark resting-places under the cold sod, and the frank hands seemed stretched out across the dark abyss!

At last, in a voice half choked with tears, Valerie said:

"Friends, let us stop! We feel—we know—that we, exiles though we be, have chosen the better part; but, if we would rest content, let us not talk of home. I, for one, cannot bear it!"

"We have certainly talked enough to give us all the blues," Netta said, with an attempt at lightness. "And indeed—but yonder come Eugene and Alix at last!"

"Alix!" repeated Hautaine.

"One of our own people," Valerie said. "You haven't forgotten the Rivières who lived at River-view? Well, this is—"

"Not the pretty little brown-eyed child I remember, surely?"

"Yes, the very same. You will like her, I know."

She said this, as the two truants came sauntering slowly up the garden-walk toward the terrace-steps, the last crimson glow from the west giving a warm tinge to the pale-brown curls that fell around Alix's slender throat, and to the white dress she wore, with its broad black sash. She looked lovely, exceedingly, as she mounted the steps and paused a moment in natural surprise at seeing a stranger, with one hand still resting on the stone balustrade.

"This is Mr. Hautaine, Alix," said Valerie.

And Alix, who had heard a great deal about Mr. Hautaine within the last few weeks, gave a start of surprise and pleasure.

"I am very glad," she said, simply and cordially; "and I—I hope he is not badly hurt," she added, looking at the young man with her shy, sweet eyes full of sympathy for his pale face and wounded arm.

It was provoking certainly, but before Charley had time to acknowledge the gentle graciousness of this reception, Eugene, who had lingered a moment behind, bounded up the steps and confronted him with all the effusion of that good-fellow welcome which at any other time he would have appreciated, but which, just then, he could not help feeling a bore.

"Why, old fellow, is this really you?" Eugene said, full of cordial astonishment. "I am delighted to see you!—delighted to have this optical evidence that you haven't gone to hobnob with the shades of Alexander and Napoleon! But faith, *mon ami*, you look as if you had come very near being admitted into that illustrious company! What the mischief have you been doing to yourself?"

"He has been wounded, Eugene," said Netta, in a tone of expostulation.

"O!—has he? Well, I should certainly feel justified in affirming that something of the sort had befallen him. Pray, Master Charley, have you received your Theresian cross, in recompense of your distinguished services and sufferings for his Imperial Majesty Franz Joseph, yet?"

Charley shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't twit the unfortunate, thou happy wielder of the compass and lines! When I *do* receive my Theresian cross, you shall hear of it, you may be sure!—Miss Rivière, I am very grateful for your kindness. I don't feel at all as if I needed to be introduced to you, I have been so often in your father's house, and I remember you so well, when you were young enough to make me feel quite old in looking at you now."

Alix laughed. "That must have been a

good while ago," she said, with an arch nod of her pretty head. "I don't think I'm very young now. But I remember you, too, Mr. Hautaine—at least I think so."

"You might do so very easily," Netta said. "But don't you all think we had better go in? It is too late for Mr. Darcy to be out—besides, we have another invalid on our list now. So, *en avant!*"

"I would rebel against being made a kill-joy in this style," said Mr. Darcy, taking up his crutches, and preparing to rise, "but that I think the saloon will be better for all of us, and we can hear some music then."

> "'Stay with me, lady, while you may,
> For life's so sad, this hour's so sweet;
> Ah! lady, life too long will stay,
> Too soon this hour will fleet,'"

muttered Eugene, disconsolately. "Are we really going in, like a set of—of insensibles?"

"We really are," answered Miss Fane, in her short way, that always settled matters. "Mr. Darcy will get sick, and Alix will get a sore throat, if we stay out here any longer."

"I'm not at all afraid of a sore throat," said Alix.

"I don't suppose you are—to-night!" their mentress retorted. "But to-morrow you will not fancy croaking like a raven; or taking pepper-tea like a salamander, either. Come, don't be obstinate. Move on!"

"One moment," said Hautaine, laying his hand on Valerie's arm, when she rose to follow the rest. "You are not afraid of the mists, are you? Will you give me a few minutes longer out here?"

"As many as you please," she answered readily, although her heart misgave her terribly. "I hope he is not foolish about me yet!" she thought. And then she said aloud, "Let us go into the garden and walk a little. It is beautiful down there."

It was beautiful down there, for the wild luxuriance of Nature had quite overgrown the trim regularity of art, and the result was one never achieved by a gardener's hand. The moon shone in three-quarter profile above the groups of acacia-trees, and her light was already beginning to prevail over the soft dusk, and faint, melting outlines of shadow along the paths they followed, while the terrace, with its massive stone balustrade and large vases, rose behind them, the white château gleamed above, the windows of the saloon were wide open, and light and music and gay voices floated out together on the still night air.

"It is all wonderfully lovely!" Hautaine said, as they stopped by a fountain, the sparkling waters of which caught the moonbeams, and glittered in them like showers of diamonds. "A man should be a poet on such a night, and in such a scene; for, after all, there *is* a charm about the south of Europe which is only to be felt—never to be described."

"No," said Valerie. "For, much as I have always heard and read of it, I did not realize in the least its exceeding beauty until I saw it."

"And do you think you are settled here for good?"

She shook her head.

"I wish I could think so. I would ask nothing better than to spend my life in this way—but papa has nothing pastoral about him. He likes the world, with all its rush and roar."

"So did you once, if I remember rightly."

"Did I?" she said, dreamily. "I believe I did; but it is so long ago, I had almost forgotten about it. At all events, I don't like it now."

"Don't you even like Paris?—you, who used to adore New Orleans with all your French soul!"

"No—not even Paris. When I was there, I only found that it wearied me unutterably. Papa talks of Rome for next winter, or Naples, or Madrid, or ever so many more places; but I shrink whenever he mentions them, for all I ask is to stay just where I am."

"I don't understand you," said her companion, a little curiously. "Once those very places were the desires of your heart."

"I don't understand myself," she answered, "unless it be that they are those deferred sugar-plums of existence of which Guy Darrell talks. I longed for them when I could not reach them—I panted for them

when they were afar off—and now that they are so near, I feel as if they were the fairy gold that turned to moss and leaves in the grasp."

There was a pause which remained unbroken for several minutes. They turned into another one of the long, straight alleys, and had nearly reached its extremity, when Hautaine spoke, quite abruptly:

"Valerie, when I was in Baltimore, I heard that you were engaged to Maurice Darcy."

Valerie started—started as if a rude hand had been laid on a bare nerve; but she did not speak for some time. Then she said, slowly—

"Who told you so, Charley?"

"It is true, then?"

"Never mind about that, just now. Tell me who told you so."

"I—I'm not sure that I remember who it was," Charley said; for instinct taught him better than to mention Julian Romney's name. "I heard it after I saw you. I think my old friendship gives me the right to ask what I should very much like to know—if it is true?"

"It was true," she answered—for her life she could not say more.

"You were engaged to him?"

"Yes."

"And—and you are not engaged to him now?"

"No."

Another pause. Then—

"I have been fighting against my love for you ever since then," Hautaine said sadly, "and I have been so far successful that I can now say—I am sorry to hear it is not true."

"Then, dear friend," said Valerie, holding out her hand, with a sudden impulse, "somebody did us both a great service. A great service to you if you, were cured of a weakness which only brought you pain; a greater one yet to me, if it gives me back the old affection which we felt for one another when we were children together in our beloved Louisiana."

"I said that I had been fighting against it," answered he, pausing short in his walk. "And I thought I had entirely succeeded in crushing it out, or I would never have come here! But the first sight of your face, the first tone of your voice, told me that one word would be enough to waken it again—and—and I'm almost afraid that word has been spoken!"

"I am not afraid of it," said Valerie, firmly, for she felt that a moment had come when she must put an end to all false hopes for very honor's sake. "You might have clung to me so long as I was heart-free, Charley, but I know you too well to fear that you will do so when I tell you that, although my engagement with Maurice Darcy is broken forever, he is the only man I have ever loved, and the only man I would ever have married!"

He looked at her wistfully—so wistfully.

"And—when you say that he left you?"

"Yes, through my own fault, he left me."

After this, they walked silently along for some time. It was bright moonlight now, and their shadows fell sharply and distinctly on the path before them. Almost as sharply and distinctly Hautaine's tones sounded, when he spoke again:

"*Che sarà, sarà!* Yet it seems right hard that the prize for which I have striven a lifetime should be seized at last by a stranger's hand; but—there is very little courage in groaning over defeat. I should certainly by this know how to practise the resignation which comes of despair. I don't mean to break my heart, either, Valerie—if that is any consolation to you."

"It is a great consolation, dear Charley."

"And I did not bring you away to torment you with the old story that has troubled you so often before. I wanted to tell you something—which you ought to know—and—to ask your advice. Will you sit here a little while—or are you afraid of the night air?"

"Not the least afraid," she answered, as she sat down on a stone seat that ran around the fountain to which they had returned. "I am all attention, and all interest, as long as you want me."

He sat down beside her, but he did not speak for a considerable time. When he did, his eyes were fixed, not on her face, but on the water before him.

"Valerie, do you remember the day I

met Maurice Darcy in your grandfather's house."

"Yes," she answered, in a low voice. "I remember it very well."

"And did he ever tell you the meaning of what you saw and heard that day?"

"Never."

"He—Gaston, I mean—told me he thought you did not know. He wanted me not to tell you; but I could not—" he gave a gasp as if for breath—"I could not stay here in the house with you, and with *him*, and let you think—let you not think, that is—all that I deserve should be thought of me!"

"Charley," she said, quickly, "I could never think any thing wrong of you."

"I remember you said that—or something like it—once before. It hurt then—it hurts now—worse than a blow. Good God! Valerie, when you say that, you do not know that I am worse than a murderer!"

"Charley!"

"Yes," he went on excitedly, "a hundred times worse! A murderer at least makes short work of his victim, but I have condemned mine to a lifetime of torture! Valerie, think if you can—if indeed anybody besides myself can imagine—think of what I endure, when I look at Gaston Darcy's crippled form, when I remember his blasted life, and when I know that *it is all my work!*"

"Charley!"

"Yes—all my work."

Valerie sat aghast. Her wildest conjectures had never gone so far—her most extreme fears had never pointed to this. This, then, was the wrong which Maurice Darcy could never forgive—this the crime which he had declared brought its own worst punishment! And, as the cripple's lined face and bent figure rose before her, surprise and horror together seemed to chain her tongue, until she could scarcely have uttered a single word if her life had depended on it; but indeed Hautaine went on rapidly, as if he did not care to wait for comment:

"I sometimes think that even the sufferings he has endured have scarcely equalled mine—scarcely exceed the remorse I have endured for years! I have seen that face of his wherever I went—and in every sound I have heard his voice! I have endured almost a thousand deaths, and borne within my heart a canker which has poisoned for me sometimes even your smile! The war, when it came, was a blessing to me—but the bullets never found their best mark. Other men—men to whom life was all fair and bright—were stricken down beside me; but I—I was spared!"

"Oh, Charley, hush!" cried Valerie, finding her voice and a half sob together. "Hush! It is terrible to talk in that way! Yes, you were spared, and I will tell you why—you were spared to feel that there is One above us who does all things well. You were spared to know that there is no human wrong or error to which He does not grant the power of expiation. Oh, be comforted! Look at that poor face of Gaston Darcy, and see what a sublime patience suffering has put there; then, do not dare to say this suffering has been ill sent."

"I know! I know! But then, it was not God who sent it."

"It was God who permitted it."

A pause—longer than any which had preceded it—and then Hautaine lifted the head that had sunk upon his hands, and said hoarsely:

"I believe you know that Maurice Darcy and I were once friends."

"Yes."

"Friends the very best that ever were, I think. We never made any formal protestations of the sort to each other, but I am sure I never cared for any other man—scarcely even my own brother—as I did for him. And he liked me just as well. We met in Italy, and were together whenever I was there; indeed, in many other places besides, for Maurice was almost as much of a rover as my profession made me. In the summer of '60, the Argemone was ordered to the Mediterranean."

"I remember it."

"Yes—I suppose you do. Well, as soon as possible, I procured leave of absence, and took up temporary quarters with Maurice, then painting in Florence. I found with

him (his father had died very shortly before) a younger brother—this Gaston—then a boy of nineteen or twenty. You don't know how plainly I see him yet as he looked at that time. Not handsome, I suppose; but so full of life and generosity that his face was irresistibly attractive. I liked the boy—no one could have helped liking him; and he took a great fancy to me. How strange it seems, to think that that man yonder is *he*—I have not learned to realize it yet. Well—he took a fancy to me. Maurice more than once laughingly declared that I was rivalling him in Gaston's affection, and that Gaston was ousting him from mine. One day—" he spoke very rapidly now—"Maurice received a letter, summoning him on business to Paris, and he asked me if I could not remain with Gaston until his return, for the boy was rather inclined to dissipation (his only fault), from which the elder brother was trying to wean him by gentle degrees; and he was very unwilling to leave him alone in a foreign city, exposed to its many temptations and consequent dangers. I promised willingly to remain, and I remember Maurice's smile, as he said, 'Thank you, *amico mio*—I thought I could depend on you!' He *did* depend on me—and for what?"

There was a long silence, during which an instinct prevented Valerie from lifting her eyes to the face near her. So she sat with them steadily bent on the four stone tritons, that stood in unchanging attitude, while the water danced and sparkled over their upturned heads. And when Hautaine resumed, it was in the same quick, nervous tone as that in which he had before spoken:

"Maurice went away, and I do not think I shall ever forget the cordial farewell grasp of his hand, for I never felt another! The last words he said to me were: 'I trust you implicitly; but, pray, remember to be watchful.' I knew what he meant, and for several days Gaston was scarcely out of my sight. I felt the nature of the trust the more, because I knew that, if I had not been in Florence, he would have taken Gaston with him to Paris; for I had long been aware why he was more than ordinarily anxious about the boy's habits. In the mother's family—Gaston's mother's, I mean—there was an hereditary tinge of insanity, and, in every instance where madness occurred, it had been the result of dissipation. Well, two or three days after Maurice left us, I met, very unexpectedly one day, a squad of two or three officers from the Argemone. Of course, they were delighted to see a comrade, and the *rencontre* ended in an invitation to a post-opera supper that night—an invitation in which young Darcy was included, and which all the circumstances rendered it impossible to refuse. I went, in a state of uneasiness, but it was a great relief to me to find that Gaston kept entirely within the bounds of moderation. Indeed, he behaved so very prudently that I began to revolve and consider possible a scheme which only the devil himself could ever have put into my head, and, before the supper ended, I had invited all the party to dine with me on the following evening. I think sometimes of that next day with such vain exasperation as I imagine to be the portion of the lost spirits in hell. A dozen times, between sunrise and sunset, I was on the point of excusing myself on *any* plea, and withdrawing the invitation—but still the sun went down behind the Arno, and it was not done. A dozen times at least, an instinct warned me of coming ill, and I put the warning from me. I remember that, just as I sat down to table, Maurice's face rose before me, with a look of stern reproach—but it was too late then! Several additions of artist-friends had been made to the party, which made it quite a large one; and, with all my efforts to preserve order, the wildest conviviality soon set in. I must hurry over this—it almost kills me to think of it, even now. Among all the jests and songs and peals of laughter that made the roof ring, I grew more and more uneasy, for I soon saw that Gaston had thrown off the restraint of the evening before, and was drinking with the deepest. Remonstrance would have done no good, I knew, for intoxication always made him resentful and quarrelsome. My only hope was in breaking up the party soon, but this

seemed almost an impossible thing with a set of men who were my own invited guests, and who, furthermore, had just declared an intention to make a night of it. What I endured as I sat there, with a smile on my lip, it would be impossible to say; but it was only a foretaste of that which was to come. At last, my worst fears were realized!—a violent quarrel began between Gaston and one of the guests—one of the Argemone officers—in which I strove to interfere. The former at once turned on me fiercely, charging me violently with an attempt to domineer over him. I remember that I was patient a long while—longer than was thought a virtue by the men around me—but, at last, the blood began to boil in my veins, and the wine I had been drinking to heat my brain. A bitter insult—I have long since forgotten what it was—finally proved too much for me. I flung a glass of wine in his face—and then we closed together. Of what followed I have little or no recollection. For the first and last time in my life, a perfect devil seemed to enter into and take possession of me; and, in my overmastering rage, murder would have been as easy to me as the raising of my hand. I forgot Maurice—I forgot whom I fought—I forgot every thing save the brute instinct of ferocity. I have a faint recollection of struggling like an infuriated tiger—a recollection, still more faint, of lifting Gaston Darcy's slight form in my arms and hurling him bodily out of the window!—Then a cry of horror burst even from the half-intoxicated men around me—and I came to myself—and the sickness of an unutterable death rushed over me.

"When they took him up, he was still breathing, but the doctors said the spine was fatally injured. You see, however, that he has lived—a cripple!"

Silence again—silence so deep and painful that Valerie almost heard her heart beat in her ears, as she sat, chilled in every limb and sickened in every fibre, so that motion would have been almost as impossible as utterance. She did not see Hautaine—she only saw the moonlit gravel at her feet—when he spoke again:

"I was by his brother's bedside when Maurice came back, and I had rather he had cursed me—a thousand times rather he had killed me—than said the bitter words that ring in my ears yet. I sat there, and it seemed the voice of God that ordered me forth, that called me what I felt myself to be, the 'betrayer of trust!' I think he would have killed me—I hoped that he would—if he had not felt that life was my worst punishment, and his best revenge. From that day to this, I have endured worse than death—I endured more than that to-day when I saw the man I ruined writhe beneath the agony which I laid upon him!"

The voice sunk now with an intonation which said: "I have done"—and, after one moment's pause, Valerie's clasped hands covered his own, and a cry, so tender and yearning that it might have burst from a mother's lips, sounded on the still night air:

"O, Charley! My poor—poor boy!" was what it said.

He laid his hot brow down upon those cool soft hands, and neither of them spoke for some minutes. At last he said, without raising his face:

"Now you know all about it. Tell me if I can dare to do as he wishes—dare to stay here and meet him, like—like any one else."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Why not? O Heavens! You don't know how I have fled from his presence—how I have shunned him as men shun a pestilence! I feel as if the same roof could not—should not—shelter us both!"

"And I feel—I know—that if you were once thrown with him, and once saw his marvellous content, his beautiful patience, as we see it who live with him, you, too, would feel that, although your act may have robbed the world of a man, it gave God a saint! You, too, would realize, as he does, that all ends work for good in His hands—and you, too, would learn resignation to the inevitable."

"Resignation!" he repeated, almost fiercely, "yes, resignation for any thing which was not my own work. But I did this, not God. How should you know what it is to feel this agony of remorse, this knowledge—"

He stopped short, for even the moonlight showed him the change which had come over his companion's face. He saw a spasm of pain contract the pale features, and a mournful light shining out of the large eyes raised to his own.

"You are mistaken," she said, slowly. "You judge only by the surface, and you do not know that I bear on my life a weight of remorse to which your own is, or ought to be, almost nothing. You ruined Gaston Darcy's mere physical life, and you gave him the means by which he will ascend to Heaven; but what would you think if you had killed body and soul both? What would you feel, if you had deliberately led him to some point of despair, and then seen him rush on a death for which he was all unprepared, and which was as much your work as if you had killed him with your own hand? Answer me—what would you think of that?"

Her voice had risen into solemn pathos, as she uttered these words; and all the anguish of her soul seemed going out toward him, and being laid open before him. In an instant he knew of whom and of what she spoke. He remembered Julian Romney's face and manner on that night which proved so fateful, and then a sudden impulse came over him.

"Valerie, dear friend," he said, quickly, "I know what you mean, but believe me you are all wrong. It was no thought of you, no act of yours, which sent Julian Romney to his death. Did you know that I was there, at the party where the quarrel occurred. If you would only—"

But she silenced him by a gesture.

"Hush, Charley! It is very good of you; but all this has been said to me before, and still it does not lighten my burden. I know all about it—I know how unlike himself, how morbid, and wretched, and desperate he was—all through me. We will not speak of it. I cannot do so yet—I scarcely think I ever shall. I only did so now, that I might convince you that others suffer as much as you; and to bid you take comfort and faith. This is not surely the first time you have seen Mr. Darcy since—you have met him before?"

"Once. But he sought me out himself then. It was in Paris; and he came to offer his friendship, he was too generous to say his pardon. A few months after that, I met Maurice for the first time since we parted at his brother's bedside—and you remember *he* would as soon have touched a viper as my hand!"

"Maurice is very hard," said Valerie, mournfully.

"But is he not right? Have I—I, with more than his blood upon my head, any right to touch that other hand?"

"Yes, you have," she said, firmly. "And Maurice is wrong. It will do you good to stay. It will please *him*—and surely you would count any sacrifice well made that did that."

"Does he indeed wish it?"

"Did he not tell you so?"

"Yes, but—"

"There is no 'but' in the question!" she interrupted. "You must stay. First, because he requests it. Secondly, because this is your proper home, now that you are wounded and sick. Indeed, you shall remain until you are well again. We will not give you up! Put these morbid thoughts from you, dear Charley. Recognize God's will over and above all things; and, when we recognize that, we may as well bend to it, you know; for resistance is utterly useless. Remember how many years of suffering have atoned for the act of one hour; and then remember, also, that it is time to cease mourning. I know there must always be a saddened regret, but the bitterness of unavailing remorse is bitterly misplaced. Sinning and suffering! Ah! it is only what we all are doing; but the suffering need not be prolonged eternally, for even God does not do that, save to those who have never given one thought of regret, or made one aspiration for pardon. Promise me that you will stay?"

"I did not ask your advice without meaning to take it. I will do whatever you decide."

"I have decided, then. You shall not leave us until you must. Now let us go back to the château—I am sure this night air cannot be good for you—and I will make Alix sing something."

CHAPTER V.

THE HERO OF SADOWA.

THERE was one person at least to whom Valerie's decision proved far from agreeable; one member at least of the château party who wished its new inmate at—well, at Vienna!

On the very first day of his arrival, Hautaine developed a marked admiration for Alix—an admiration which sensibly increased with every succeeding hour of his stay, and which caused Eugene's friendly regard and friendly cordiality to diminish in exact ratio. For, alas! the irruption into Arcadia was come, the golden hour was over, the magic charm was vanished, and the rough world, where every man takes what he can get, burst in upon the fair idyl which had a little while back seemed flowing so smoothly to a peaceful close. Now all was changed. Changed how much, or how little, no one could tell; but even Eugene's bold heart misgave him somewhat. He would not have feared ordinary rivalry at all; he had not cared in the least about the effusive admiration those bearded young engineers expressed for *La petite Fée*, as they dubbed Alix, but then—well, this was different. A rival of any sort would have been bad enough, but a rival who threw him—Eugene—completely into the background, and took the highest place in everybody's regard, by virtue of his pale face and his wounded arm, and his general halo of heroic circumstance—a rival who sang an excellent baritone, who could tell a false semitone as soon as he heard it, and who had the whole array of musical terms at the end of his tongue, why it was no wonder that Eugene began to think a good many disagreeable things, and sometimes to say them.

"I think I shall go back to work," he said, one day, moodily enough, when he and Valerie chanced to be alone together. "I got a letter from Ledoc this morning, and—well, there's no earthly good in staying here. I think I shall go, Valerie."

Valerie looked up at him quickly. She had seen for some time how matters were drifting, and it would be hard to say whether her relief at Charley's desertion, or her sympathy for Eugene's annoyance, had been greatest. But now, as she noticed what a dark cloud rested in the usually sunny eyes that were bent on the distant line of purple mountains, the latter came over her all at once with a rush.

"Did M. Ledoc write for you. Are you obliged to go?" she said. "If not, I am sure I don't see why you should do so."

"No—he mentioned nothing about wanting me," her brother answered. "But there's no good in staying. I might as well go, and be done with it."

"No good in staying," repeated Valerie, who was a little puzzled, and thought he might perhaps have been rejected. "No good!—I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Just what I say," answered Eugene, shortly. For in truth he did not mean any thing, excepting that he was vexed and out of temper, and wanted somebody to "take it out" on. "You are so well occupied there is no need of me," he went on, after a while. "I think I'm rather in the way than otherwise. I had better take myself off for a time, and perhaps when I come back—"

He stopped, partly because he felt a little ashamed of his pettishness, and partly because Valerie looked so grieved.

"I am very sorry," she began. "We never any of us meant to neglect you—I least of all—but we only thought that you were at home, and that you could entertain yourself better than we could entertain you, and—"

"Pshaw! You know I didn't mean you!" interrupted the ungrateful brother. "Indeed, I don't know that I meant any thing, excepting that I am tired to death of Hautaine's braggadocio stories of Sadowa and Königgrätz. How long is he going to stay?"

"Until he is thoroughly recovered. I hope," Valerie answered—for, although she felt very sorry for Eugene, she had no intention of giving up Charley.

"Humph!" Then, after a pause—"Is that arm of his never going to get well?"

"Doctor Fontaine says it is doing excellently; but that he must not use it yet."

"The sling is too interesting to be given up soon, I suspect. And then it must be pleasant to have three or four women waiting on him and cutting up his food as if he were a great baby."

"Eugene!" said Valerie, indignantly, and then she stopped. It was natural, no doubt, that he should be jealous; but still, even jealousy has its due limits, at least in expression. "Eugene, I am astonished at you," she went on; "your ideas of hospitality must surely have changed very much, for I am sure you would not have talked this way once. If Alix is the matter—"

"Alix is not the matter!" said Eugene, who felt the justice of the rebuke so sharply that it made him irritable. "Alix is not the matter at all," he repeated, tossing his cigar as far out of the window as he could send it. "She is at perfect liberty to bestow as much of her time and attention as she pleases on this—this wounded hero. I beg your pardon for having said any thing about him. He *is* a puppy, but then I ought to have remembered that he was always a sensitive point with you."

"He is no more a sensitive point with me than any other old friend would be," Valerie answered, flushing slightly; "but I am very sorry to hear you talk so. It looks as if—as if you were a little envious. Now, Charley speaks for himself—"

"He does indeed, to an uncommon degree!"

"But you—ah, Eugene, I wish you were more generous. Besides, I don't see why you are so jealous. As far as I can judge, your chances of success are as good as, or better, than his."

"Better!—you think so?" he cried, forgetful of his late denial that Alix had any thing to do with the matter.

"Yes, I think so," his sister said, smiling. "But what is the good of tormenting yourself in this way? You have surely forgotten your old motto, 'Let the best man win.' It is a fair field; and if Charley wins—"

"That he never shall," interrupted Eugene, quickly. "Thank you, Valerie. I see what a fool I was, and I suppose I ought be a little ashamed. The lists are open, certainly; and he—but then I'll make a death-fight of it, and you'll see that I will win."

"I should be very glad to see it," she said. But still, in her heart, she thought that she had rather Charley won—poor Charley, who had had such a hard time with his love for her, and was besides unhappy in a way Eugene never dreamed of.

Meanwhile, Charley was certainly very much attracted by the dainty, brown-eyed fairy who had such pretty, artless ways, and who looked up so confidingly sure of admiration, when she had executed a high trill or a low scale in very finished style. And there was nothing singular in this, for he was one of a large class of men who are incapable of entertaining a passion which has proved hopeless, and who possess a great, and, for them, happy faculty of transferring their affections on very short notice. He had been in love with Valerie for years—more deeply in love than he could ever be again with any other woman—and, as long as he entertained the least hope of success, had been entirely loyal and constant to that affection. But, when once she made clear the undoubted fact, that he need cherish no expectation of return, he had been able to resign himself to disappointment without the least danger of a broken heart. He spoke simple truth when he told her that he had conquered his love for her, or he would not have sought her presence again—and, although the old fancy may have stirred a little at sight of the old smile and the old glance, yet she administered a very effectual *quietus* in the garden that night when she made her confession of love for another man. Difficulty did not spur him on, as it would have spurred some people; for he was naturally indolent, and, like too many of his passionate, changeable race, did not fancy trouble. High grapes were always sour to him, and that fruit the best and ripest which was most easily plucked. If Valerie really preferred Maurice Darcy to himself, why—

"There were maidens in Scotland more lovely by far,
Who would gladly be bride to the young Lochinvar"

So he sang duets with Alix, which were all horrible discord to Eugene's soul; he talked German with her (German, so execrably bad, on both sides, that it would have agonized any ear of the fatherland); he recounted all the musical gossip of Vienna, where musical gossip abounds; he encouraged her professional aspirations, which Eugene abhorred; he praised her voice until she glowed into grateful rapture; and he finally put the climax on his audacity by offering to become her *maestro* during the period in which they both remained at the château.

"Not that I think I know as much music as you do," he went on, in explanation; "but I have heard that a poor teacher is better than no teacher at all. Now, I could at least make you practise regularly."

"And I am sure I need to be made," Alix said, laughingly, but with a deprecating glance at Eugene, who was glowering over the familiar proceedings of the new acquaintance, "I promised Herr Volkner that I would do so, but I am afraid—ah, one's good resolutions are worth so little."

"Unless there is somebody to help one keep them," Hautaine answered, in his easy way. "And I am afraid you have only been aided to break yours.—Eugene, for instance, seems to be absolutely jealous of the piano."

"Colonel Aylmer thinks it is horrible," said Alix, with another little glance at Eugene—this time one of resentment.

"What is it that I think horrible?" asked Colonel Aylmer, who was ready for a battle at once.

"Music," said the little, would-be cantatrice indignantly. "You know you talk about it—oh, dreadfully!"

"I don't talk about music—I don't care any thing about it—I only say that it is not a fit profession for you."

"I should like to know—"

But here Charley interfered. "He is a heretic, Miss Rivière. We will leave him to his heterodoxy. If there is one thing in the world he likes better than another, it is argument; and I make it a point of conscience never to gratify him. Will you take your first lesson now?"

After this, instead of mending, matters grew rather more serious. True, they had a short interval of quiet, when Eugene was obliged to go back to his work; but he came again as soon as possible, and was more than ever outraged at the state of intimacy existing between Alix and Charley. Then it was that the former found herself placed in rather a trying position. Some women, women fond of flirtation and its attendant good things, would have liked nothing better than two admirers—two pieces of tinder, rather—to play off against each other in this way. But Alix, being of another metal, found nothing whatever attractive in the situation, nothing pleasant in the consciousness that there was a strife for her favor going on all the time. Hautaine was too easy in temper, and too perfect in breeding, to allow himself to be betrayed into indiscretions, or tokens of vexation; but Eugene, far more impetuous by nature, also had himself less well in hand; and he not seldom looked both sulky and savage. He would get into "ways" that were positively dreadful, and distinguished himself by being brusque to Hautaine, rude to Alix, and generally disagreeable to everybody else. He did not succeed in making anybody uncomfortable, however, unless it was his ladylove. She, poor child, did not at all understand the meaning of the black looks and sarcastic speeches freely cast in her direction, and strove sedulously to propitiate him by every means in her power, save the right one. As, for example:

"You seem very busy of late," Eugene said, entering the saloon one morning where she chanced to be alone. "What with your needlework, and your music, and your walks, I have hardly been able to obtain a word for days past."

"I did not know you had tried," said Alix, looking up with a smile that might have soothed a bear. "I thought it was I who had not obtained a glance for days past."

"That was because you were too much occupied to notice them," said he, a little shortly.

"I am sure I don't know how I have been more occupied than usual."

"Don't you? Well, no doubt I am mistaken. That seems to be my habit of late; but, whether you were or not, I should not have thought of troubling you with my indifferent powers of entertainment. I can't sing like Mario, or play like Liszt; I can't criticise like the *Saturday Review*, or talk German like—like Bismarck; so, all I *can* do is, to keep myself in the background."

"As for music," said Alix, "I think you might know a little more about that, and be a little more liberal—but, for the others, I am sure you can do them all quite as well as the rest of us. For my part, I am very sorry that such a fit of modesty has seized you; for I liked you better when you didn't keep in the background."

"Humph!" said Eugene—mollified in spite of himself.

He amused himself for some time then, by playing with one of her spools; and, after he had tied at least a dozen knots in the thread, and broken each one of them off, he tossed it back into her work-box, and inquired what she was doing.

"Not very much," she answered. "I am only making a sling for the wounded arm of our hero of Sadowa. See! I have made it out of the Austrian colors in compliment to his new nationality. Is it not pretty?"

She held it up before him, and Eugene looked at it, and felt that he hated it. The hero of Sadowa! Perhaps, after all, that was the great sting, since he, poor fellow, was not the hero of any thing. If he cherished a wish in his heart at that moment, it was that he, too, had been at Sadowa (in the Prussian ranks), and thus possessed one good chance at least to have had it out with this detested rival.

"I suppose it is pretty," he said at last, somewhat ungraciously; "but I am not fond of either yellow or black. Indeed, I don't know that I'm fond of any colors, excepting the red, white, and red."

"Then, when you need a sling," she said laughingly, "I will make it for you out of those beloved colors."

"Thank you," he returned, "but, as I am not likely to be the hero of another Sadowa, I shall not probably call upon you. My fighting-days are over for good and for all."

"Ah, that is your same old philosophy, but—do you think it is necessary?"

"I certainly don't think it is worthy of a Confederate officer to descend to the rank of a mere mercenary," he answered, with ill-restrained bitterness.

"You surely do not mean it," said Alix, looking at him with eyes full of indignant reproach. "You surely do not mean it, when you remember how many of our best and bravest officers are soldiers in other armies now; and when you remember, too, the great names that have made the profession illustrious."

"I suppose you see promise of another Duke de Berwick in your hero of Sadowa."

"I don't know about seeing that," she returned; "but I am sure he could not select a more glorious model."

Eugene bit his lip angrily. There were never any Dukes de Berwick in the engineer service!

"He must be very much gratified by your approbation of his profession," he said.

"I don't suppose he cares any thing about it," she answered. "A soldier thinks more of his laurels than of woman's opinion."

"His laurels! I did not know that anybody owning allegiance to the double-headed eagle won any laurels at Sadowa."

Alix laid down her work and looked at him with a regard which he did not much approve.

"Were there no laurels brought away from Appomattox?" she asked, at length. "A Confederate soldier, it seems to me, should be the last person in the world to think that honor always goes with victory, or shame with defeat."

Woman as she was, she had the best of it; and her opponent was frank enough to confess as much. After that, he was not again heard to demur when the hero of Sadowa laughingly responded to his title. But whether he liked it or not—

"God bless us all, that's quite another thing!"

"To-morrow is Alix's birthday," said Valerie one evening, a week or two later. "What can we do to celebrate it properly?"

"To-morrow Alix's birthday!" repeated the general, who was deep in whist. "Indeed! And how old will she be?"

"I am getting quite old," said Alix, with a sigh. "I shall be eighteen."

"Dear me! So old as that?" asked Miss Fane. "No wonder your face should be wrinkled, and your curls becoming gray. How fast old age comes on, to be sure!"

"Now you are laughing at me," said Alix, good-humoredly. "But, indeed, I do feel as if it was strange that I should be even so old as that."

"We all have that feeling of astonishment at every birthday," said Hautaine. "I am sure it was with difficulty I realized not long ago that I am fast approaching that bourne where, according to the proverb, a man must be either a fool or a physician.'

"And your prudence about your arm entitles you to hope that you may be included in the latter category," said Mr. Darcy, smiling. "Is it not so?"

"He has been very prudent and very obedient," said Valerie, looking at him with a smile; "and I, for one, will grant him the full benefit of a diploma. But you are all forgetting my question—what shall be done to celebrate Alix's birthday."

"I can suggest nothing better than a dinner-party," said the general, who was meditating whether or not to play a king second in hand, and thought that the most important matter of the two.

"Dear me, papa," said his daughter, with a faint laugh. "You surely forget that we are not now at Aylmers, with a whole neighborhood at our call. The *curé*, and Dr. Fontaine are our only available guests, you know; and I really don't think that either of them would enliven the occasion very much. No; whatever we decide upon, must of necessity be limited to ourselves."

"Shall I tell you what to do?" asked Mr. Darcy, making a rash play, and laying himself open to a trump on his strongest suit. "You have been talking of an excursion to the hills for some time. Why not go to-morrow, and celebrate Miss Rivière's birthday there."

"Why not, indeed?" exclaimed Eugene. "What say you, ladies all?"

"I think it is a very happy suggestion," answered Valerie; "but what does Alix say?"

"I shall be delighted," said Alix, looking radiant.

"And I shall be resigned," said Miss Fane. "As a general rule, I abhor picnics. They are indissolubly associated in my mind with earwigs, caterpillars, and bad colds; but it will afford me pleasure to victimize myself to-morrow."

"We will go, then," said Hautaine. "Is it settled?—all of us?"

"All who can ride," said Mr. Darcy. "Naturally, I am not one of that number."

"And are we to leave you behind?" said Valerie, turning quickly to him. "That will never do!"

"Why not?" he asked. "My time was always spent alone, until I knew what such kind friends were. Besides, I have a long letter to write to Maurice, and I shall be fully occupied with it."

"After that declaration, Valerie, I fancy you can have nothing more to say," laughed Eugene, as he rose to leave the room "If it is decided that we go, I must at once send down to the village and secure Lucien and his mules, or—from the pure perversity of human circumstances—some one else will anticipate us. This is the season for tourists."

"I see my concern is wasted on your account," said Miss Aylmer, looking at Gaston. "I wonder if there ever was a man whose idea of comfort was not associated with the entire absence of every thing feminine?"

"And abominably ungrateful it is," said Netta, indignantly; "for I should like to know what any or all of them would do without us."

"There are men on record who have tried the experiment," said Hautaine, "and they found that they did so well without you, that the only wonder then became how they ever managed to do *with* you."

CHAPTER VI.

WHO LAUGHED LAST?

THE next morning was as bright as could have been desired even for a picnic excursion, and, at a very early hour, the whole party were gathered on the terrace ready to start. Lucien, the handsome, sunburnt guide, stood below the steps with his four gayly-decorated mules, on one of which Baptiste was busily engaged in packing a hamper, while the group above talked and lingered, and did not seem in any haste to be off.

"Dear me!" said Miss Fane, who was the last person to make her appearance, looking very sleepy and rather injured, "are we going to ride pillion-fashion?—or are we going to take it turn about walking?—or are three of us going to stay at home?—or what is the meaning of there being so few mules?"

"You are each expected to mount a gentleman behind you," said Mr. Darcy, who was leaning on his crutches and enjoying the bustle of departure as much as those immediately interested in it. "As, by your own admission, you are the ranking lady in point of age, you will be allowed the first choice of a companion. Shall it be Mr. Hautaine or Colonel Aylmer?"

"Neither," she answered, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I don't want to be shoved over the first precipice we reach—General Aylmer, is there anybody else you would particularly like to accompany?"

"No one else at all, Miss Netta," said the general, gallantly. "There never *is* anybody else when you are present."

"Then, pray consider yourself invited to ride behind that extraordinary-looking affair on which I suppose I am to be perched."

"Is she really in earnest?" cried Alix, turning to Mr. Darcy, in genuine consternation. "Are we really to have a gentleman behind us? Oh, my dear general, please—please go with me!"

"I am very sorry that a previous engagement prevents my having that pleasure," said the general, laughing. "But I will delegate the duty to my representative Eugene—"

"No, no!" cried Alix, quickly, "I can not think of troubling Colonel Aylmer.—Mr. Darcy, do come with us—Mr. Darcy, pray! Indeed, no harm shall happen to you, if you will only ride behind me."

"Listen to that mighty offer of protection, will you?" said Hautaine, with a laugh. "Miss Alix, you had better take care of me. I am wounded yet, you know."

"The linked music of Sadowa long drawn out," said Eugene with an only half-suppressed sneer.—"Miss Alix, I cannot call upon you for protection, but I flatter myself that in any emergency—and these mountain ascents are dangerous, you know—I should be able to render a little. Come, which of us will you accept?"

Alix stood twisting a little riding-whip rather nervously in her hand; and looking with an embarrassed face from one to the other of her would-be escorts.

"I don't accept either, Colonel Aylmer," she said at last. "I—I wish you would please let me just go along by myself."

"That is flattering to you both, at any rate," said Mr. Darcy, laughing.

"It would provide me well with attendants," said Valerie; "but I don't know that they would be worth much under the circumstances.—Come, Alix, which shall it be?"

"Indeed, I'm very much obliged to you both," said Alix, still looking at the two gentlemen with a troubled expression; "but—but I think you would either of you be too heavy for my mule! You see I have already chosen the smallest."

She made this announcement with the most sincere gravity, and was not a little surprised that its only reception was a burst of laughter all round.

"You absurd creature!" said Miss Fane, "do you mean to go through life believing every thing that anybody chooses to tell you? Moderate your fears! We are each to have a cavalier, but he is only to lead our mule."

"But—but is not General Aylmer really going to ride behind you?" Alix asked, still rather doubtful.

Netta laughed as, by the joint efforts of the general and Lucien, she was safely deposited in the saddle. "Not unless he completely breaks down with fatigue," she said. "I only hope I may live to get down from this rickety affair," she added, resignedly, as she gathered up her reins and started forward with a jingling of many bells.

The next couple to set forth were Eugene and Alix, for, to the great delight of the former, the privilege of attendance had devolved upon himself — Hautaine having gracefully surrendered the point, and offered his escort to his hostess. It is to be hoped that duty was, in this instance, its own reward, and that he did not think of the use to which Eugene *might* put such an opportunity. But as Alix moved off with her stalwart escort, Charley certainly set his teeth together for a moment, muttering, too low for any one to hear, the familiar proverb, "He laughs best who laughs last." This jealous paroxysm was only momentary, however; for there was no shadow on his face when he looked up and waved a very spirited farewell to Mr. Darcy, as they two moved off.

They passed through the vineyards, and, where the regular mountain ascent began, came suddenly upon the general and Miss Fane, resting comfortably under the shade of a gigantic chestnut.

"We are waiting for Lucien and the sumpter-mule," the former explained, when they came in sight. "Is he with you?—Ah, there he comes. *Mon brave*, the place of a guide is always in the van."

"Oui, m'sieur," said Lucien, who understood the gesture, if not the words; and he led his mule forward immediately. The tinkling cavalcade fell into line behind him—Eugene and Alix, who had been delayed, bringing up the rear, while Miss Fane who came next to the sumpter-mule, looked back over her shoulder with a bright smile, as they started.

"Valerie, what do we most remind you of?" she asked, gayly. "Do you remember the old woman who had rings on her fingers and bells on her toes? One would really think that all her family connection were here to-day."

"We move to a concord of sweet sounds, certainly," Valerie answered; "but I rather like it."

"Yes, it is not disagreeable—especially if one has not much to say."

And, as this was peculiarly the case with Miss Aylmer and her attendant, the pretty music of their bells served in place of conversation, as they wound up the steep mountain-path after their guide—generally under large trees which overshadowed their way with dense foliage and cool, dark shade, but, now and then, catching glimpses of the valley beneath, and the wide plains beyond, all bathed in the glad golden sunlight of the south. The air was deliciously fresh and pure at that high altitude, fragrant too with the wild, sweet odors of the forest; and so clear that distant objects seemed incredibly near and distinct. The village and the château lay as it were at their very feet, while here and there they could distinguish all the residences which they knew, some standing out boldly, like old baronial castles, others half hid among embowering trees. Against the far horizon shone a silver line, which Lucien told them was the Loire on its way to the sea; while, towering above the lower range they were treading, the higher mountain-tops sharply cut against the deep sapphire sky.

So, as they jogged forward, Valerie and the man who had once been her lover conversed gravely of landscape effects, of tints and views; while Alix and Eugene became very oblivious of Nature, and talked of matters decidedly more interesting—at least to one of them. All the clouds of the last few weeks had temporarily dispersed, for Eugene was determined to make good use of his opportunity, and Alix, who was very much relieved to find him in a good-humor once more, enjoyed the change without considering how long or how short a time it would last. Her laugh rang as clear, her glance was as bright, as if the face at her side had never been more overcast than at present, or as if she was pleased to hold in possession once more the moody, wayward admirer, of whom, in truth, she stood considerably in awe. There is no better philosophy in the world than that of "gathering

the roses while you may," and it was one which both of these unconscious philosophers practised very thoroughly that morning. Yet, in thinking it over afterward, Eugene began to regret that he had spent that precious time in gay trifling—in a sort of veiled sword-play, where each understood the other perfectly—instead of putting his fate boldly to the touch. But Alix was so charming, that he forgot every thing save the mere pleasure of being with her, of letting his arm rest over the neck of her mule, and looking up into the brown eyes that were all aglow with the bright enjoyment of eighteen. Afterward he appreciated this folly as it deserved to be appreciated, and rated the consequences perhaps higher than they deserved to be rated, but just then he did nothing save bask in the sunshine and gather the roses, forgetting that dead roses sometimes possess very sharp thorns. Only they began to drift a little toward earnestness, when, in reply to some declaration of devotion, Alix shook her head in saucy coquetry, and bade him remember a a certain Mademoiselle de Morny for whom he had owned an undoubted *tendresse* not long before.

"And what then?" asked he, who had no idea of attempting evasion. "You won't deny that the heart can change its allegiance, I hope?"

"The heart change its allegiance! *Ma foi*, what an assertion!" cried she. "Mr. Hautaine did well to say you were a heretic by nature. What will you question next, I wonder? Why—

> 'The leaves bloom every year,
> But the heart but once; and when
> The blossoms fall off sear,
> No new leaves come again.'"

"Bah!" said he, irreverently. "That's all very fine; and true, perhaps—in poetry! But there's not a living man who could not refute it from experience. Indeed, the most of us would be sorry enough if we had to abide through life by our first love."

"You don't believe in first loves, then?"

"No," said the young heretic, boldly; "for not once in a thousand cases is a first love any thing but a first folly. A man's last *love is his* best," he went on—"because into that goes all his strength and passion, if he has any."

"But," said she, aghast, "his last love may be his hundredth."

"What matter—if it be love, and the rest mere fancies? For I agree with your poet thus far—we may think we love many times, we really *do* love but once."

"But if we think so every time, how are we to know the right time—the real Simon Pure—when it comes?"

He looked rather puzzled for a moment—then he glanced up with a meaning smile.

"Shall I tell you?"

"No," she said, with a deep blush; "never mind, just now. Only I think you are wrong about any capacity of love being left for a hundredth fancy. Surely Cupid's quiver is not inexhaustible; and, after having squandered affection in small coin, how can you possess it in large bills?"

"Don't make your questions so personal," he said, laughingly. "I—individually—cannot lay claim to the distinction of a hundredth or even a fiftieth love."

"Oh, you content yourself with a forty-ninth."

"Take care!" he rejoined. "I am a patient man, but, after a while, you will provoke something which you may not fancy."

"I'm not afraid," she said, tossing her head very prettily.

"Give me a defiance, then."

But this she declined to do. On the contrary, she suddenly stopped talking, and became very much interested in the cavalcade ahead.

"They are halting," she said; "I wonder what it means? Surely we have not reached our destination!—if so, you must have been very entertaining, Colonel Aylmer, for the way has seemed very short."

"I am inexpressibly charmed to hear it," said Colonel Aylmer; "for, if I am not mistaken, this is where we strike our tent—Eh, Lucien, is it not?"

"This is the place," said Hautaine, coming forward. "Miss Alix, are you tired? Let me take you down."

Alix held out her hand with a smile, but Eugene peremptorily interfered. "That is

my right," he said; and, the next moment, his strong arms swung her lightly to the ground.

It was a very beautiful place that Lucien had selected for them—a secluded ravine high up among the mountains, where a bubbling stream gushed out of the heart of a rock, and fell into a basin that was placed below it. The light streamed deliciously soft and dim through the green shade of the overhanging trees, and the whole spot was so lovely that it was no wonder pious hands had dedicated it to the patron saint of the district, and placed a rude cross and image over the stream.

"'Drink, weary pilgrim, drink and pray
For the kind soul of Sibyl Grey,
Who built this cross and well,'"

said Valerie, as she stood looking down on the water with which they had all crossed themselves. "I would like to do something of this sort," she added. "I wonder who it was that first dedicated this spring?"

"It ought to have a statue of St. Hubert instead of St. Clothilde," said Eugene. "I mean to tell M. le Curé so the next time I see him."

"It is a great resort with the wood-cutters and chestnut-gatherers, and all the other peasants who live in these mountains, Lucien says," answered Miss Fane. "Perhaps you had better make your complaints to them—only I don't expect they would care much about placing their spring under St. Hubert's protection."

"I vote that we come here every day to dine," said Hautaine, seating himself on a large stone, and looking round with an air of great complacency. "It is really exquisite! —Valerie, I hope your sketch-book was not left at home?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Valerie replied. "I am sorry, for the whole scene is worth sketching, especially Lucien's mules."

"I think she admires the mules more than she does us," said Alix, turning to Eugene with a laugh.

"They are more in her line, perhaps," answered that young gentleman.—"Lucien, suppose you unpack that hamper, and put the wine in the stream to cool—it must have grown warm by this time."

"Suppose you do *it* yourself, Mr. Indolence?" said Netta. "Lucien cannot leave his mules. I should think you would have learned, by this time, to dispense with so much attendance."

"I am afraid that is a lesson he will never learn," said the general, who was also seated on a stone, and looking by no means so comfortable as the rest of the party. "By Jove! It is very hot! Charley, my lad, if you propose coming here every day to dine, I hope you will leave me behind at the château. I may be very unromantic; but it only strikes me in the light of a very hair-brained excursion to drink flat champagne and eat melted butter."

"Pray don't slander the contents of our hamper in that way, at least until you try them," said Miss Fane.—"Eugene, do as you are bid about opening it!—'Queen rose of the rose-bud garden of girls,' will you be so obliging as to spread the cloth? Oh, dear! Valerie, just look here—the pickles have run into the preserves!"

"Throw them away," said Valerie. "Two items from our bill of fare."

"Save the pickles!" cried Eugene. "How can preserves possibly hurt pickles?"

"On the principle of sweets to the sour, I suppose," said Miss Fane. "Here they are, then. I only hope you will eat them! The butter *is* in a liquid state.—General Aylmer, that is for your benefit—you will enjoy it, I know. And here is French pastry and chicken indiscriminately mixed up together—Valerie, who *did* pack this hamper?"

"Baptiste, I suppose," said Valerie, carelessly, for she was more occupied in trailing a vine-leaf through the clear waters of the spring, than in the prospects for dinner. "At least, I gave the order to him."

"I declare, there is scarcely a thing here fit to eat," said Miss Fane, petulantly. "The marmalade is peppered, and the ham is full of honey. Yes, do look, General Aylmer, is it not a deplorable sight?"

For the general, much concerned at the dreadful bulletins from the hamper, had risen, and come forward to inspect matters himself.

"The scamp!" said he, working himself into quite a state of indignation against the absent Baptiste. "I am surprised at you, Valerie—very much surprised that you should have left such an important matter to a careless servant.—What is that, Miss Netta?"

"What, indeed?" asked she solemnly, as she regarded a crushed mass that had just been extracted from the depths of the hamper. "I think—I rather think—it was once a *paté de foie gras!*"

"The *chef-d'œuvre* that Jules promised me, I suppose," said Valerie, laughing.

But the general did not see what there was to laugh at in such a serious matter. He looked at the injured *paté* very wistfully. "It must have been excellent," he said, in a tone of regret.

"Hang it all, who cares for *patés?*" cried Eugene. "Fairies don't eat them, I am sure, and we are fairies for the nonce. We shall have to content ourselves with the fare of the hermit of the dale—

> 'A scrip with herbs and fruit supplied,
> And water from the spring.'"

"I told you all, it would be infinitely more sensible to stay at home and invite the *curé* and Dr. Fontaine to dinner," said the general, addressing the company, with the ruined *paté* still in his thoughts.

"Perhaps so," said Valerie; "but we are here now, papa, and we must make the best of it. Let us gather up the remnants of the hamper, and see what we can do with them in the way of a dinner."

They did so much with them, that it was a very pleasant feast to which they all sat down at last, under the shade of the overhanging mountain-side. True, a grasshopper occasionally sprung into a glass of wine, and various insects of the creeping order made themselves entirely too familiar with the plates (not to speak of a large frog which perched himself on top of a loaf of bread, and had it pitched after him when he departed). But, then, people expect such little agreeables as these, when they go picnicking; and don't mind them very much, as a rule.

"This is simply delightful," said Eugene, who had entirely recovered all his usual spirits. "Really, as Charley says, I would not mind coming up here every day to dine—that is, if we had a balloon at command."

"I would ask nothing better than the mode of locomotion we employed this morning," said Hautaine, indolently.

"Charley," screamed Miss Fane, "what is this on my neck? Oh!—ah!—take it off—take it off!"

"It is Eugene's caterpillar," said Charley, laughing; "one that was on his sleeve a minute ago. He sent it over to you as a proof of affection."

"Oh," she said, shuddering, "this is dreadful! Caterpillars *ad libitum*, are many degrees worse than ruined *patés*. Let us go home!"

"Accept my humble apologies, and an apricot," said Eugene.—"Charley, fill up her glass, and now, pet, be comfortable and quiet. Nobody is going home for hours yet."

"No; for this mid-day heat must be very intense," said General Aylmer, "although we are so sheltered that we scarcely feel it at all."

"There is almost shelter enough here to protect one against a storm," said Hautaine, looking up at the dense canopy of green over their heads, with the golden sunshine glinting on the leaves, and flickering down through them in patches of amber light. "Moonlight in this spot must be lovely. There is a moon to-night, is there not? Suppose we stay here until it rises?"

"And break our necks going down," said Eugene. "That would be— What is it, Lucien?"

For the guide had come forward and was addressing him.

"I said, m'sieur, that perhaps it would be better if we returned," the man replied. "There is a cloud coming up from the southwest that I don't like; and a storm in these mountains is to be feared."

Eugene hastily drained off his glass, and, rising, followed him to an open eminence that commanded a view of the sky. When he returned, it was with quite a grave face.

"Looks badly," he said, in answer to their inquiries.—"Charley, you're a sailor go and see what you think of it."

Charley went—examined the cloud—held a brief conversation with Lucien, and returned, looking more grave than his friend.

"The very mischief is brewing there," he said. "But it may give us time to get down to the plains, if we start at once."

"I thought you just said there was shelter enough here from a storm," said Valerie, who felt very comfortable and very indolent.

"Not for such a one as is coming up now," he replied. "Ladies all, how soon can you be in the saddle?"

"Help us gather together the *débris* of all this, and we will be ready in ten minutes," said Netta. "Is there really so much need for haste?"

"There really is."

They were soon ready; but when they came forth from the leafy retreat, and looked at the formidable cloud, a cry of disgust and indignation burst from the whole feminine trio.

"You call *that* a cloud!"

"It is only an excuse to take us home in this broiling sun!"

"Let us go back and stay where we were."

"To horse! to horse!" cried Eugene, who saw formidable signs of a mutiny. "Don't you know there may be danger of the worst sort in a cloud no larger than your hand, even when the sun is shining as brightly as now? You might trust us, I think."

"We *do* trust you," said Alix.

"Do you?" he retorted, with a smile; "then your foot in my hand thus—one bold spring—there! Now you are seated as securely as Di Vernon herself!—Now, Lucien, lead on—and, in case we reach the plains before the storm catches us, I hereby vow a silver cup to St Clothilde's well."

The sun in which they set out was broiling, but they did not suffer from it very long. Soon the dark cloud swept up from the verge of the southern horizon, and began to overcast the sky; then a distant, menacing growl was heard.

"'There is a sound of thunder afar,
Storm in the south that darkens the day,'"

quoted Valerie, laughingly. "I wonder if our excursion will end with the adventure of a drenching after all?"

Her companion did not answer at once; he was gazing anxiously at the heavy mass moving forward so steadily over head, with the now obscured sunlight gilding its dark edges in a manner beautiful to behold.

"I only hope a drenching may be the worst thing that befalls us," he said at length. "If the way were only not so rough, that we might move a little faster."

For, by this time, flashes of lightning began to play round their path, and terrible bursts of thunder to echo from the clouds above.

"Listen!" said Valerie. "Is it not grand? There is nothing I like so much as the prelude to a storm. What a profound hush seems to have seized on all Nature, as if every leaf were listening to the warfare of the sky; and how the sounds above resemble the voice of many batteries—only more terrible! When I was a child, I used to think that there was war in heaven, and what we heard was the great archangel hurling his heavenly hosts upon the rebellious legions. Listen!"

It was grand indeed—but of an awful grandeur! From side to side the sky was curtained, and blackness had seized upon the noonday. The play of lightning grew more vivid—and the rumbling crash of the thunder so near, that the very animals shrunk and shivered from head to foot, when it burst upon them. As Valerie said, the calm of Nature was so intense as to be solemn, for every woodland sound was hushed, every twig hung motionless to its stem.

"Charley," she said, gravely, "I am very much afraid that we shall not reach the lowlands before the storm bursts."

"I am afraid not," said he, still more gravely.

"What shall we do, then?—this path will be horribly unsafe."

"And the woods no better. I am sure I don't—steady!"

A flash that blinded!—a roar that deafened!—and a perfect hurricane of wind that tore down the mountain-side, crashing the forest-trees in its path.

The next thing Valerie knew, her mule was crouching to the ground, quivering in every limb, and her own hands were clasped over her eyes, striving to shut out that awful glare which had seemed to blind and dazzle at once.

"This will never do," she heard Charley say; and, in the roar of sound, it seemed as if he was talking a long way off, instead of at her side. "If we attempt to keep this path, we shall be dashed over the precipices. We must try the woods, though there we may be crushed to death by the falling timber.

"There is not much safety from that danger here," gasped Valerie. "Look!"

For, at that moment, a large chestnut fell with a crash across the path just in front of them, thus effectually barring further progress.

"At all events, we need not wait to be killed," said Hautaine; and, seizing her rein, he turned into the forest.

They came full upon the others, who had done likewise, hurrying and rushing for refuge, and finding none. The three gentlemen forsook their charges for a moment to hold a hurried consultation; but it did not result in much. "The very first ravine, the first overhanging rock—any thing!" cried Eugene, and then he sprung back to the head of his mule, leading it forward, "over bush, bank, and scaur," with a reckless disregard of every thing save some chance of safety from the terrible storm. The rain now began to fall in torrents; but the wind had not abated in the least, and threatened every moment to sweep them down the mountain, making it indescribably difficult to retain any foothold whatever. In all its majesty and terror, the storm was abroad in the mountains, and the scene was one which beggared all description. The lightning seemed to leap from point to point, like darts from the hands of angered angels; the thunder echoed and reëchoed among the rocks, until its reverberations, instead of dying away, seemed rather to increase in volume; water-courses unnumbered sprung into existence, and torrents roared and tumbled where the morning had seen only a quiet brook or a dry bed, while the pouring rain and the howling wind seemed a mere accompaniment to the grander elements of strife that clashed and roared together in one deafening din.

At last, however, Eugene descried a shelter—a narrow, high ravine—and turned quickly into it. The wind swept through it with terrible force, and water-falls leaped from all its sides; but at least there was comparative safety to be found there. They drew up breathless, under the shelter of the overhanging hill, and then Eugene turned to his companion, with an eager cry of relief.

"Thank God!" he cried, and then he stopped short—for it was not Alix, but Valerie, who threw back the hood of her cloak and looked at him!

It would be hard to say which of the two was most thoroughly astonished; for, until that moment, Valerie had thought that her attendant was Hautaine; but she saw at once how the mistake had been made in the darkness and tempest which had suddenly enveloped them.

"You!" cried Eugene, finishing his sentence very differently from the manner he had intended. "You!—and—you let me do this!"

"I did not know until this moment that you were not Charley," Valerie answered, as eagerly and apologetically as if the fault had indeed been hers. "I am very sorry, but—but he will take good care of Alix."

"Good care—" It was fortunate that the blast came upon them quite strongly at that moment, and swept away the rest of the sentence to regions unknown. "It is enough to drive one mad!" cried the thoroughly exasperated young man. "I must have been crazy, I think!—and what am I to do now? I can't leave you here, or I would go after her. Confound him! No doubt *he* knew perfectly well what he was about!"

Valerie could not comfort him, for, although she was brave enough, she dared not bid him leave her, even if he would have done so; and to set forth in search of his missing love was the only thing that could have relieved his impatient jealousy and disappointment. So they stood together silently; she praying softly to herself—he

chafing bitterly in the thought that Hautaine, not he, was Alix's defender in the first emergency of danger that had ever risen for them. But rescue for him was at hand, though he did not know it. They had not long been halting, when Valerie suddenly caught sight of a head adorned with large ears looming through the rain, and, with a cry which the wind seized at her lips and bore away, she caught Eugene's arm, so that he too might perceive that their retreat was shared.

"Alix!" he cried, springing eagerly forward; but it was only to meet another disappointment, for a drenched shadow of Netta Fane welcomed him with an hysterical gurgle of laughter. "Where is she?" he cried, impetuously. "What have you done with her?"

"We know nothing about any body but ourselves," said the general; "and we consider ourselves fortunate to know that. What we have gone through, it is impossible to tell! I make no rash resolutions, but, if ever I am found on another mountain excursion—"

"Alix is safe, Eugene, I have no doubt," said Miss Fane, kindly. "You know she is in good hands. Charley would throw himself over a precipice before she should be hurt; and then, there is Lucien."

"Yes, there is Lucien. I have some hope in *him*," said the ungrateful Eugene. "I am glad you have come. I can leave Valerie with you, and go after her myself."

"Go after her yourself," Netta repeated, all aghast. "Oh, Eugene, don't be so rash! You will be killed as surely as you do—just look at the storm!"

"I am going," repeated Eugene, as if that was all there was to be said. He went for Valerie, and brought her close to them, and then he buttoned up his coat, pulled down his hat, and set forth. "I hope you won't get knocked over by a falling tree," said the general, philosophically; and they all shrugged their shoulders as the headstrong fellow vanished from sight, leaping with his quick, agile stride over the torrents that were rushing and roaring around.

Meanwhile Charley and Alix had been much less slow in discovering that change of arrangement which the momentary halt by the fallen chestnut had made. Indeed, they had not proceeded very far before there came another glare of vivid light, another thundering crash, another sweeping blast on which a hundred erl-kings seemed to ride, and Charley, turning round to reassure his companion, saw Alix reeling helplessly from the saddle. He had no time for conjecture as to how she came there, and indeed little cared. He caught her only just in time, and when she came to her senses, of which the shock had momentarily deprived her, she found herself sheltered in a crevice of rock, with Hautaine's arms around her, and Hautaine's voice sounding in her ear, even above the din of the tempest.

"My love! my love!" was what she heard, in accents infinitely tender and infinitely yearning. "My God! you surely are not hurt?"

"No, no," she answered, quickly—"only—only stunned! But oh, it was so horrible! And—and there is another!"

She clung to him, shrinking and quivering like a child, and hid her face on his shoulder from the dazzling flashes that seemed to scorch her very eyeballs. She had never been strong-minded enough to control or overcome the terrible fear of lightning which possesses almost everybody in greater or lesser degree—and it is safe to say that, on the present occasion, Hautaine did not wish her one iota less cowardly or less weak. There was an inexpressible pleasure in feeling her clinging to him, almost unconscious that she did, while he strove to whisper reassurances. "Tremble not, love, thy Gheber's here," was about the sum and substance of them; but they seemed to be of a consoling nature, nevertheless; for at last she ventured to inquire what they were going to do.

"Lucien, what are we going to do?" shouted Charley, turning to the guide who stood near, striving to keep a foothold for himself and his mules against the sweeping wind that was howling a triumphant march along its course.

"M'sieur, I do not know," the latter answered, moving nearer, so as to make himself audible, "unless we try to find my

brother's hut, which is near here somewhere."

"Your brother's hut?"

"Yes, m'sieur; he is a wood-cutter."

"And do you think you can find it? Heavens! what a blast!"

"I can try. Neither mademoiselle nor *les petites*"—he pointed to the mules—"can stand this much longer."

"Lead on, then," said Charley, "and may St. Clothilde only be kind enough to keep us on our feet!"

"Will not mademoiselle mount again?"

"No; I shall carry her."

And mademoiselle, thus peremptorily made a thing of naught, rejoiced thereat in her heart, and hid her face closer than ever from the wild storm into which they boldly ventured forth. Hautaine felt the convulsive trembling that shook her from head to foot, whenever the deafening bursts followed a flash that had shown them all their way, only to leave it in obscurity the next moment. It was a fierce battle with the elements which he and Lucien fought, as they struggled along through the wind and rain—more fierce than that which Eugene was fighting at the same time, because their path lay along a much more exposed declivity of the mountain. More than once, they each thought that the end had come for themselves, as well as for the helpless being under their care. But they were both men of nerve and pluck—they struggled on, with the storm in their teeth, and were at last rewarded by seeing the outline of a woodman's hut dimly showing through the rain. Almost at the same moment that Valerie and Eugene gained their retreat, this other refuge was won. Lucien took up a large stone, and, with one, quick blow, broke the lock which fastened the door. Then they sprang within and hurled it shut against the raging storm that followed and beat upon them.

There came the breathless pause of spent exhaustion, followed by congratulations, laughter, and the production of a flask that never before had done better service. Giving no heed to Alix's remonstrances, Hautaine administered a dose to her then shared the remaining contents between himself and the guide, who was now busy with his mules. By an unusual chance, the hut boasted two compartments, and, anxious to escape from the society of their four-footed companions, at Lucien's recommendation, Hautaine took Alix into the inner room. It held, by way of furniture, a rough table and one chair. Alix sank into the latter, and Charley took a seat on the former. They both felt rather exhausted, and, after a pause, the gentleman was the first to speak.

"I am sure you will be ill."

"No—I hope not."

"I am confident of it. But what can I do? The brandy—"

"Oh," cried she, "please don't say anything about more brandy. I could not—indeed I could not—take another drop."

"You took about enough for Queen Mab before. However, it is gone, and that is an end of the matter. I only wish—"

"Don't say you wish we had not come," she interrupted, eagerly. "I would not have missed to-day for the world. I have enjoyed it so much."

"Have you? That will be pleasant for Eugene to hear."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Only that it is Eugene who has had the happiness of contributing to your birthday enjoyment—not I."

He spoke quickly, almost passionately, as a jealous lover is apt to speak; but he felt sorry the next moment when he saw such grieved astonishment creep into Alix's eyes.

"You are unkind!" was all she could say; for, in truth, she was wondering whether her ears had played her false, out there on the mountain-side under the rock, or whether the wind could have uttered the tender words that yet rung in her heart like music.

The young man leaned down so as to bring his face on a level with her own. He had handsome eyes, and knew it well—Alix knew it, too, when she looked up and met them fastened on her face with a regard which the dullest woman alive could not have misunderstood.

"Was I unkind?" he said. "I never meant to be that, Alix."

The lingering tone in which he spoke her name was as unmistakable as the look had been; and a nervous tremor seized the childlike girl who was on the brink of her fate, and knew it perfectly well. She had been brave enough, and fenced gallantly enough, up to this last moment; but now she broke down utterly. There is always something very softening, very contagious, so to speak, in a declaration, especially when it is made to a very gentle and yielding heart. Therefore, the odds all along had been that, of the two rivals, he who spoke first would win the day. If Eugene had made his proposal in the morning, the result might have been as favorable as he could have desired; but, with characteristic carelessness, he let the opportunity slip, while, with equally characteristic impetuosity, Hautaine now seized in both his hands the chance afforded him, and marched forward to make the best—or worst—of it.

"I made a vow this morning," he went on, "Alix; do you care to hear what it was?"

Alix did not look at him now. She regarded the floor very steadily, and, after a while, said "Yes," rather inaudibly.

"I made a vow," pursued the young free lance, bending down so close that he could see the beating of the slender temple-vein, and mark the quiver of the sweet rose-lip, "a vow that your eighteenth birthday should not pass without being made memorable in your life, by the option of accepting or rejecting a heart that loves you better than I can say. You have not known me very long, Alix, and—and you will have to know some things about me which may shake your faith in me. But still I love you so dearly, that I think I can venture to ask whether the coming year is to be a very happy or a very miserable one to me. Alix, which is it?"

A pause.

"Alix, will you not tell me?"

"I—I don't know," said Alix. Then breaking down, and beginning to cry: "How can you expect me to tell you?"

Hautaine paled slightly. "Is your decision, then, so hard a one for me to hear?" he asked, gravely.

"I—I don't know! Oh!" with a cry, as a peal of thunder shook the slight building until it quivered. "How can you talk about such things, when we may be killed any minute?"

"Who cares?" said Charley, impatiently. "I mean at any rate to know my fate before I die. Alix, this is no time for trifling. It must be yes or no, before we part again. Poor child, how you are trembling! Is it I who am frightening you so?"

"No," she murmured. "It is the—the thunder!"

He said, "Poor child!" again, and then, as if she had been a very child, he took her into the protecting clasp of his arms.

"Alix, if you don't tell me differently," he said, in a voice which quivered slightly, "I shall think you like me well enough to take your place here forever. My love, may I think so?"

There was a very boisterous accompaniment to this idyl going on. Outside, the lightning blazed, the thunder crashed, and the clouds poured; within, the mules kept up a restless stamping, and Lucien sang to himself a wild *chanson* which he had caught once in a military camp. Hautaine heeded none of it—nor did Alix much; for at last she raised her face all wet with tears:

"I like you well enough to do any thing," she said, desperately; "but it seems like—like tempting Providence to talk about it."

"I am not afraid of it," returned Hautaine, irreverently. "And now I mean to tell you how long I have been in love with you."

Just then, as it chanced, the outer door was burst open, and Eugene, dripping from his shower-bath, sprung into the hut. "Good Heavens!" he cried, when he saw only Lucien and the mules. "Alix!—Hautaine!—Where are they?"

"Within, m'sieur," said Lucien, pausing in his chant, and waving his hand toward the inner door, as if he had been chamberlain of a royal palace. "*Entrez!* They will be charmed to see m'sieur," he added, hospitably.

But it may have been a foreboding which

rendered m'sieur himself not quite so certain of that. At least he hesitated a moment before opening the door, and only did so very cautiously then. He might have shivered it, however, for all that the absorbed pair within would have known. They did not even turn their heads, and, after one glance, he closed it again, and came back to Lucien.

"They are so well entertained, it would be a pity to disturb them," he said. "Is there any brandy left in that flask? These mountain-rains of yours are terribly chilling!"

The last rays of the setting sun were tracking bright lines over the château terrace, and gilding Mr. Darcy's figure, as he leaned on his crutches and watched with laughing eyes the forlorn return of the party that in the morning had set out so "gayly bedight."

"Go away, and stop insulting us," said Miss Fane, who was the first to alight. "I can tell you, that, if you had gone through all that we have, you might be thankful to look half as well as we do."

"Allow me to suggest, Miss Netta, that you have not had the pleasure of seeing yourself in a mirror," said he, laughing. "Your hat—"

"Hush!" cried she, lifting up her hands "I don't want an inventory of my misfortunes. As for the hat, it only serves me right for wearing it on an absurd mountain excursion! General Aylmer and I are of one mind—we abjure picnics from this day forth for evermore!"

"Has not Netta's indignation exhausted itself yet?" Valerie asked, as she mounted the steps with her own remnant of a hat in one hand, and her torn, draggled dress upheld in the other. Mr. Darcy, you are the last person in the world who ought to make a jest of our calamity, for it is to you we are indebted for it. One member of the party especially," she added, lowering her voice as she reached his side, "has chanced upon a deeper misfortune than a drenched coat to-day."

He glanced at her interrogatively. She pointed to Hautaine, who was lifting Alix from her saddle.

"Does that face tell you nothing?"

"Yes," he answered, looking at it with a smile, half amused, half sad. "It says 'Poor Eugene!'"

BOOK VI.

CHAPTER I.

THE SHADOW OF BLOOD.

"TIME put his sickle in among the days," and, with the summer of 1867, came the Great Exhibition of Paris, where, in the train of crowned heads, flocked all the world's large class of sight-seers and pleasure-seekers. The month of June found Valerie and Netta alone at the château, for General Aylmer had gone with Eugene to Paris, and Gaston Darcy had been there for some months under medical care. The health of the latter was breaking so fast, and his debility and suffering increasing so rapidly, that before he left them Valerie often felt inclined to urge that he should write to Maurice bidding him return if he wished to see his brother again in life. But her courage never bore her out in doing this. She would begin often, but break down always.

"You have never told Maurice how weak you are," she said one day, when she had been assisting Gaston to his chair, and watching one of his fierce, frequent paroxysms of pain.

He looked up with a smile—faint, sad, yet beautiful.

"No—on the contrary, I always write to him cheerfully. I have been a clog on Maurice's life too long already. I must spare him now as much as I can."

"But is this right?—is it even kind?" she urged. "Put the case to yourself. Would you thank Maurice for a concealment that kept you from his side when—"

She paused, and he quietly finished her sentence.

"When he may not have much longer to be here? I don't know. But I think—I hope I am acting rightly. God only knows what I would give to see him again."

The voice sunk, the blue eyes gazed wistfully and mournfully out of the window that opened to the south—that far south where Maurice was fighting and struggling to save a nation from anarchy and a people from ruin—and there was a choking in Valerie's throat which forbade speech, even if she could have further combated this resolution, the root of which lay in that grand element of unselfishness which, of all men, this man most fully possessed.

He had gone away from them in April; and as the two ladies sat on the terrace one day in the drowsy afternoon heat, and sewed, for lack of something better to do, Valerie said, half-absently—

"This is the last of June."

"Is it?" said Netta. "Time flies so quickly when one is monotonously occupied! I don't envy the people in Paris their enjoyment of this weather."

"It is time, however, that papa came back for you," said Valerie. "I must write to him, for I will not hear of your missing the best part of the exposition through your kindness in staying with me."

"Don't trouble yourself, dear," returned her friend. "I really care so little about the matter that, save from a feeling that it would be a shame to live so near Paris and not see the famous exposition, I should not

stir a foot. I am growing as indolent as you are."

"It is not indolence with me, it is indifference."

"And are you really determined to see nothing whatever of this epitome of the world's industry and beauty?"

"Why should I, when I feel fatigued only at the thought of it? I care nothing for inventions—I care still less for kings, queens, and satraps! I never read the grand accounts with which the papers teem, that I don't think how tired every body—especially the poor empress—must be."

"Valerie, you ought to struggle against this frame of mind. You are growing *ennuyée* and weary of every thing."

"I believe I am," said Valerie, dreamily.

Then the conversation dropped, and they sewed on, with no sound about them, save the notes of birds, and the low summer hum of insect-life. This profound stillness had reigned some time when Miss Fane looked up at last, and found that the work had fallen from Valerie's hands, that her head was thrown against the high back of her chair, so that the sunlight played lovingly over the arch of the white throat, and her eyes were closed while the brows above were knit into a painful contraction common to them of late. Netta's own needle paused in its swift stitches, and she gazed so long and so anxiously on the face before her, that, if its possessor had not been wrapped in deep thought, the scrutiny must have made itself felt.

"Valerie!" she said at last, so abruptly that Miss Aylmer started and opened her eyes.

"Netta, how you startled me!"

"Where were you? You seemed in so much pain, I thought you might like to be recalled."

"Did I?" A deep shadow of the same expression fell again. "I was only where I often am—"

"In Mexico?"

"Yes—in Mexico."

"I wish you would keep away from there," said Miss Fane, impatiently. "It does you no good to be picturing all sorts of dreadful things to yourself; and your being miserable cannot affect the course of events one way or another."

"I know that as well as you do; but when we suffer, we are not philosophers."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Every thing—the very worst. You see how darkly the papers this morning speak."

"I see that they seem to think the fall of Queretaro certain."

"The betrayal, you mean."

"And then—?"

"And then—God only knows!"

They sat silent for a while longer. Then Valerie took up a hat which lay on the grass by her chair, and began to tie it on.

"Where are you going?" asked Miss Fane. "You have become so restless of late."

"I know I have—but I cannot help it. Sometimes — to-day especially — this fear seems weighing me down, and I cannot be still. Would you mind if I left you alone for a short time?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the village."

"May I not go with you?"

"I don't mean to be ungracious, but I had rather be alone."

Miss Fane sighed, as she sat still and watched the white-robed figure walk slowly away under the green shade. Vigils of pain and anxiety were written on the form almost as plainly as on the face, for the old voluptuous contour was gone, and in its stead there was only a wasted attenuation. No wonder. As Valerie herself had once said, it was sterner trouble than the mere aching of disappointed love that weighed upon her. It was the awful burden of remorse; and lately it was the horrible, sickening fear—daily looming closer—that this remorse might soon be doubled.

She had not wished Netta with her, because she was going to the church, and she wanted to feel herself alone there. For once, it was all empty and deserted, for once no other footstep besides her own echoed on the paved aisles, no other form knelt in the abandonment of human misery before that altar where dwells our hidden Lord, and where the marble angels who guarded the tabernacle seemed bending forward to hear her prayer. Never was one more fervent

breathed; never did a poor struggling soul cry with more yearning pathos, "Jesus, Son of Mary, have mercy on me!" She asked nothing for herself—not one healing drop for her own sore heart—she only prayed, as we pray for life, that protection might be given the man whom her fault had placed in peril, that he might be delivered from the dangers that encompassed him, and that over his head might sleep the safety, on his life might rest the happiness, which, for a time, she had driven from both. Neither did she forget to utter one fervent petition for the gallant heart which even then rested so still, for the royal head which even then lay so low, amid the "plumy palms" of the South.

She only knew how long she had been in the church by the level rays of the setting sun when she came out. She paused a moment in the door to glance at her watch, startled to see how late it was; and as she did so a dark figure moved from the shadow of the archway toward her. The sound which accompanied this movement made her start, and turning quickly—for the second time on that spot—she faced Gaston Darcy.

They met almost as brother and sister might have done, and then—while with a sharp pang she traced the fearful strides that, since she saw him last, suffering had made—he said:

"I have been waiting for you some time. The fruit-vendor yonder told me you were in the church."

"When did you reach the village?"

"About an hour ago. You see I meant to take you by surprise."

"And did not papa or Eugene come with you?"

"No. I left word for them that I was gone, but I did not see them before I started."

"Then you should have written to let us know that you were coming, so that we could have met you here. Of course, however, Watkins is with you."

"Yes, but I sent him on to the château. I mean to walk home with you."

"Do you feel strong enough to walk?" she asked, anxiously.

"I think so. Why do you ask?"

"You look much worse, dear Gaston."

It was not the first time she had called him by his name, but he had not heard it from her lips in a long while, and his wan cheek flushed with pleasure at the sound. He held out his hand, and clasped hers warmly, as Maurice's brother surely had a right to do.

"Thank you," he said, softly. "Yes, I am worse, but strong enough yet, I hope, for what lies before me. Valerie—" his voice sank—"have you heard the news?"

"News!"

All things seemed to grow black before her—the golden sunshine, the green lindens, the gay booths, were all blotted out in a moment. She leaned back against the carved door-post, sick and shuddering—longing, yet fearful, to hear more.

"News!"

Gaston Darcy pointed solemnly into the dim church.

"You were praying when I came. Say another prayer for the soul of the Emperor Maximilian."

There was one moment's selfish relief!—then the awful shock that thrilled a world came home to her!—She looked at him with horror-stricken eyes.

"For his soul!"

"For his murderers, if you can. He is dead."

She gazed for one moment longer in awe-struck astonishment, then she turned away, and he saw her traverse the aisle, and sink again before the altar. She had prayed for him a minute before, as living—she prayed for him now, as dead. And, God forgive her, that she could *not* pray for those upon whose heads rested his blood—for the mongrel bloodhounds, and the crowned adventurer, who shared that guilt between them. The kingly soul that had suffered, and struggled, and gone, needed little intercession, little save thankfulness of release; but for her whose name had been last on his dying lips—for the woman who loved him as even women rarely love—for the gentlest nature and truest heart among all the victims that crime and wrong have slain through others—what had not a woman's heart to ask, for her, of faith and strength—strength to await that meeting from which parting shall be no more!

When they were walking slowly home together, Valerie asked Mr. Darcy what he thought of the chances for his brother.

"Don't be afraid to tell me," she said, sadly, as he seemed to hesitate. "The worst has been with me for many a day."

"I scarcely know what to fear, or what to think," he replied. "I have not heard from Maurice for so long that I know nothing of his whereabouts — only this thing I *do* know, that there will be a wholesale slaughter of all the imperialists whom those—those men can touch."

"Yes."

"And Maurice has been too much noted by the emperor's favor to escape their vengeance, if he does not leave the country at once."

She answered nothing. The gray shades of evening were beginning to close around them, and, as they crossed the bridge, they caught the gleam of a light from the saloon window, which looked so bright and homelike that at any other time it would have cheered them. But now their hearts were too heavy for cheer—too heavy for any thought but that which was weighing them down. At last, when they were in the middle of the bridge, Valerie stopped, with a sort of gasp.

"I cannot stand this any longer," she said, hastily. "I have borne it until the burden has grown too much for my strength. Gaston, you know what Maurice is to me—tell me what you mean to do."

He told her in a few words.

"I mean to wait long enough to hear from him, and, if I do not hear, I mean to go and look for him."

"You!"

"Yes, I. Cripple as I am, if he be alive I will find him."

He lifted his wasted form as he said this—light came to his eyes, color to his pallid cheek, and for one moment he looked the man that Nature made him. And, as she gazed, a flash of resolve came into Valerie's heart.

"You are right," she said, holding out her hands. "It will be strange, indeed, if you and I together cannot do this."

He looked at her in surprised incredulity.

"You and I!"

"Yes, if you will take me with you."

"Valerie, my child, you do not understand—"

"I understand every thing," she said, impetuously. "I understand that I, of all people, should seek for him, since I sent him there to suffer—it may be to die. I understand that I will never allow you to go alone on such an expedition."

"I will have Watkins."

"Watkins is a very faithful servant; but he is only a servant. Hush! I will go! It is all my fault—every thing—and I must bear my share of the consequences. It is my fault that Maurice is away from you, and that you need to attempt any thing for which you are so unfit as for this voyage—therefore, I shall take Maurice's place by your side."

The glow of sunset—what was left of it—fell on the resolute young face, with its firm mouth and glowing eyes; and Gaston Darcy saw at once that, unlike the most of her sex, she meant every word that she uttered. After a long pause, he said:

"But who will go with you?"

"Papa, of course."

Mr. Darcy retreated a step, in his astonishment—astonishment as much at the tone as at the announcement.

"You surely do not think that General Aylmer will ever consent to such a plan?"

"Leave papa to me. I will answer for him. Gaston—" she came a step nearer, and laid her hand on his arm, while her eyes looked in his face, full of a pathos which it was hard for him to resist—"dear Gaston, don't try to dissuade me! I am sure I shall die, if I am obliged to stay here in this horrible inaction, and eat out my very heart with fear. Gaston, there *can* be no harm in it!—I am his cousin, remember!—and, although I am not worthy to say so, I loved him very much!"

Ah, the proud head bent itself at last! What would Valerie have thought if this confession, and its attending circumstances, had been foretold to her twelve months before? She the forsaken! This man, his brother! But at last, after weary struggle, there had come to her the best knowledge

that can come to woman—the knowledge that

> "her dignity
> Is this—to cast her virgin pride away,
> And find her strength in weakness."

Maurice's brother bent his head, and laid his lips on that soft hand—then he said, gently:

"As far as it rests for me to say so—do as you will. But I cannot help thinking that your father will never consent."

"I think he will."

She let the words fall very slowly; and then stood with her hands loosely clasped before her, gazing down at the water which flowed so swiftly and darkly beneath their feet.

"It looks quiet," she said, wistfully; "and of late I have so envied all things quiet."

"Perhaps you are right, after all," said her companion, looking at the thin, pale outlines of her face. "Perhaps your resolution may be for the best. Change of scene may do you good, and—"

He did not finish his sentence. He only stood quietly, gazing like herself down on the flowing stream which was hastening along to the boundless ocean, as we all hasten forward to the joy or sorrow of the unknown future, until at last Valerie turned.

"I should not have kept you here so long," she said, wearily. "I forget every thing, it seems. Let us go home."

CHAPTER II.

THE RIGHT OF REPARATION.

A MONTH passed by, a month of waiting which sickened the very soul. At last, in the full rich loveliness of summer's prime, the last day of July came—and no news of Maurice had yet been heard. Two of his comrades had written to Gaston—one from New Orleans, the other from Havana—but only to say that they could give no tidings of him. He had left Queretaro, a few days before its fall, on a secret mission to the mountains; and they could only hope that he was still there, with those of the native chiefs who proposed to inaugurate a guerrilla warfare against the Liberals; but they did not attempt to conceal their fear that he too had been included in the massacre of all that was good and true in the unhappy country which lay prostrate under the sword.

The last of these letters came on the 30th of July. The next morning, Valerie electrified her father by an announcement of her desire to accompany Gaston to America.

"God bless my soul!" the general exclaimed in sheer astonishment, and that was all he uttered for some time.

"Well, papa?" said Valerie at last, having waited vainly for further comment.

"Well, my dear," replied her father, "I have only to say that, if you wished to confound me with surprise, you could not have done so more completely."

"I did not wish to do that, sir, I assure you."

"I expected more from your common-sense," said the general, impatiently. "Mr. Darcy is no doubt a pleasant gentleman, and a good friend, and all that sort of thing—I am sure I like him very much—but to wish to take an ocean-voyage solely on his account is foolish, my dear, very foolish!"

"Papa, you don't understand: I want to try and aid him in looking for his brother."

"Worse yet," said her father, gravely. "Surely, my dear, you have grown singularly forgetful of all the world would say of you, if you set out on such a Quixotic undertaking!"

"The world need know nothing about it."

The general shook his head.

"The world would know all about it, and I wonder where your own self-respect has gone?"

"Papa"—the girl's voice had fairly a wail in it—"don't you see—can't you understand—I must go! You tell me I look badly, and you are right—I shall die if I stay here! Regard the matter only as other people will regard it—as a voyage for change of air and scene. We need not say to anybody why we go; and you may trust me not to do any thing to forfeit my own self-

respect, or lower your dignity. If I meet Maurice Darcy, it will be as a mere stranger. But, indeed, I cannot let Gaston go alone, and remember that we, too, are his near relatives. Surely it is right for us to make those efforts which he, being a cripple, cannot make. Papa, be kind—be generous—let us go!"

General Aylmer looked irresolute. Being, in some sort, a cosmopolitan, one place was very much the same as another to him; and, intrinsically, Cuba would have been quite as agreeable—perhaps a little more so—than France. But, still, he felt strangely averse to this idea. He disliked Maurice Darcy extremely, and none the less because the prejudice was an entirely irrational one. He disliked him because he stood as the representative of much annoyance and anxiety, and because he had been placed in an antagonistic position to Valerie's claim on her grandfather's fortune; nevertheless, he had this dislike sufficiently under control to be willing to accept him as a son-in-law if he came crowned with the halo of M. Vacquant's half-million. But to go in search of him—really, that was too much! He had no desire to be instrumental in reclaiming him from the hands of Juarez and Co.! Never, in the most secret recess of his heart, had the general done such a thing as to wish, or even to hope, that Darcy might share the fate of so many gallant murdered men; but he could not help thinking that the Liberal leaders would commit a great blunder if they allowed him to slip through their fingers, and go scot-free!

"I don't see how I can possibly consent to such a thing," he said at last, irritably. "And here is your friend Miss Fane; pray what do you mean to do with her?"

"Netta's aunt, Mrs Vaughn, is in Paris, you know. She has been meaning to go to see her for some time, and she would stay with her until we returned."

"Humph! You have settled it all, I see. But it is too unreasonable, Valerie! I cannot—positively I cannot consent to such a thing!"

"Papa, would you not have taken me to Cuba if I had told you that my health made it necessary for me to go?"

"Yes—of course."

She raised her hand and drew back the curtain of the window beside which she was sitting.

"Look at me, then, and see if you do not think I stand in need of change."

The general looked, and felt rather uncomfortable as he looked. The pallid skin, the hollow cheek, the eyes with dark circles under them, told a story which it was impossible for him to disregard. He moved a little uneasily.

"You do look wretchedly. I have been telling you so for some time. I will take you to Madeira."

She shook her head with a faint smile.

"The physicians say, you know, that a patient must sometimes prescribe his own remedy. You must suffer me to prescribe mine. Nothing but the West Indies will do me good."

"By Jove, Valerie, this is very provoking, and very irrational!" said the general, getting up and walking impatiently to and fro. "I am surprised at you—a woman of your sense—to persist in this manner. I don't know what you mean. I am sure I am willing to do any thing in reason—but this is quite beyond reason!"

"Papa," said his daughter, wearily, "I thought you would be more considerate of what I have represented to you as so earnest and urgent a desire. It was my fault that sent Maurice Darcy to Mexico; and I should feel as if I was his brother's murderer if I let him set out alone on a journey which he cannot stand without great care. I have suffered—I do suffer—unutterable things. Oh, surely it is enough to tell you this, to induce you to listen to me—to heed me—to go!"

Her voice broke down in a burst of tears—tears of agitation which the physical strength was now unable to restrain—and after one astonished look the general struck his flag.

"There, there!" he said, hastily, "don't cry about it! I suppose we shall have to go, since you have set your heart on it; but it is all a confounded piece of nonsense! Dry your eyes—do! I hate tears! When does Darcy want to get off?"

"As soon as possible."

"Humph!—there might possibly be more definite information. Where is he? I had better see him about the matter."

"He is in the saloon. Shall I ask him to come to you?"

"Yes," said the general, still rather shortly.

She left the room—a degree more light-hearted and light-footed than when she entered it—and went to the saloon.

When she reached the door, she was not a little astonished, for she had not expected to see anybody but Gaston and Netta; and there before Mr. Darcy's chair stood a tall figure that looked like Eugene, and yet was not Eugene; and which, turning when she entered, proved to be Charley Hautaine. There followed all the rush of unexpected greeting and welcome, for she had thought him far away in Hungarian barracks, with little or no hope of meeting soon again. When this subsided, it was Netta who said:

"You have come just in time. He only arrived a few minutes ago, and oh, Valerie, he says that he is going to Mexico!"

To Mexico! Were they all crazy, or had she gone distraught herself? She looked from one to another, from Hautaine's resolute face to Netta's swimming eyes, and then to Gaston's pale cheek.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

"It means that I am going for Maurice," answered Charley, quietly. "There is no use in anybody's saying a word. I determined to go as soon as I heard of the emperor's death; and my furlough is made out. I know all about the country. I have been there time and again; and I think I know one or two people on whom it is possible to count. I am all ready to start, and I only came out of my way thus far to tell Gaston that he might set his mind at rest, for that I will find his brother."

"It is like you, Charley, to mean it," Gaston said; "but for all that, it must not be. Stop! I have a right to speak, and I *will* do so. For you, an Austrian officer, to go to Mexico now, would be to rush into danger of the worst kind, and—"

"Do you suppose I mean to wear my uniform, or carry my commission in my pocket?" Hautaine interrupted, half-vexedly, half-amusedly. "You may trust me for that. If the devils find out who and what I am, I shall deserve to be shot, and there's an end of the matter. But I mean to come back safe and sound to you and to Alix."

"I wonder what Alix will say when she hears of this?" Netta cried.

"She said, 'God-speed,'" Charley answered, with his eyes brightening. "Did you think I came through Germany without seeing her?—and did you think that she, of all women, would put an obstacle in my way? No; she said, 'God-speed,' and she meant it!"

"It must not be," Gaston repeated. "I should never forgive myself—Maurice would never forgive me—if you came to harm. Charley, it must not be!"

"My dear, good fellow, what is the use of this?" said Charley, good-humoredly. "I am going. Really, if you are so unreasonable, I shall be sorry I did not sail from Trieste; but I wanted to see you—and—"

"And Alix," said Netta.

"Yes, and Alix—God bless her! So there's no earthly good in talking about it. The thing is settled."

"It must not be," Gaston said, repeating those four words, as if they were his stronghold of defence. Nobody knew what a temptation this was to him, or how hard it was not to yield, not to echo Alix's "God-speed," and put his hopes in the strong loyal hands outstretched for them. But he thought in his heart that it would be cruelly selfish to do so—cruelly selfish to send this brave young life into danger and death, only that he might learn Maurice's fate; so he sat in his chair, pale, but rigid as steel, with Maurice's own look about his mouth, repeating the same set form, "It must not be."

"It must be," Hautaine said, beginning at last to grow impatient. "I have told you before that I did not come to argue about it. I don't mean to argue, either—for it is settled. You have a right to say a great deal, Gaston; but you have no right to say that."

"I have the best right in the world," Gaston said—"the right of near relationship."

"And I have a better one yet," Hautaine answered—"the right of reparation."

After that, each paused and looked at the other—both resolute to have their own way; and neither meaning to yield an inch. It was all perfectly unintelligible to Netta Fane, who thought that Charley had lost his senses. What was Maurice Darcy to him, that he should cross an ocean, and go into the very jaws of danger for his sake? —and what could he possibly mean by "the right of reparation?" She saw that her own intervention would have no effect; so she turned imploringly to Valerie. "For Heaven's sake, speak to him. Make him hear reason," she said. And at the moment Valerie stepped forward between the two disputants.

"Gaston, Charley is right," she said. "He can do more good than you can; and he should be the one. He can find Maurice," she went on, looking at him with her sad, earnest eyes; "and he will find him, I am sure.—You are right, Charley, you must go."

"Of course I am right," said Charley, "and of course I mean to go. Gaston may have as many rights as he pleases; but I have mine, too—the right of reparation."

"Yes," said Valerie, gravely. "You have that. When do you start?"

"I leave here this afternoon, and I sail from Marseilles to-morrow."

So they settled it, while Gaston saw the responsibility of decision quite taken from him, and Netta sat by in speechless indignation. Before either of them had time to frame his protest in words, Valerie turned to Mr. Darcy.

"Papa has consented," she said; "and he bade me ask you to come to him. He wants to consult you about our route."

"Your best route," said Charley, "is from Marseilles to Cadiz, and thence to Havana. I take it for granted you are only going to Cuba."

"We are only going to Cuba, if you meet us there with Maurice," she said. "If not, I think you may probably see us in Mexico."

"And then—"

"And then I expect papa will go back to Louisiana," she said, with a sigh. "You can go with Gaston, if you want to, Charley. Papa will be glad to see you, and you can offer your advice to him."

Charley was very willing to obey; so, after Mr. Darcy had gathered up his crutches, they took their departure, while Netta and Valerie, left alone, looked at each other silently for some time. Then—

"Oh, Valerie, how could you do it?" the former cried, with a burst of reproach. "What has Charley ever done that he should be sacrificed to—to this Maurice Darcy? He will be killed—I know he will! And then how can you answer for sending him on such an errand?"

"You don't know what you are talking about, Netta," Valerie answered, a little wearily. "I did not send Charley. He was going of his own accord. If I had told him to stay, he would not have paid any attention to me. And he ought to go. You don't understand any thing about it—but he ought to go."

"No; I don't understand any thing about it," Miss Fane retorted. "But I understand this—if he is killed, you will be sorry for having thrown the weight of your influence in favor of such a mad resolution."

"I hope he will not be killed; but you are mistaken—even if he were, I should not be sorry for having exerted my influence; because I believe it is his duty to go."

"Why is it his duty? What is Maurice Darcy to him?"

"He is a great deal to him. He is a man whom he loved, and a man whom he injured, and—and you don't know what it would be to Charley, if he could do this. It would be paying off a greater debt, and lightening his life of a heavier burden, than you can even imagine."

Miss Fane was silenced. She did not understand in the least, not any more than she had done before; but Valerie's tone awed and hushed her impatient reproaches. When she spoke again, it was very differently.

"I don't pretend to judge of things that I know only by halves. It seems to me very strange; but you may be right. I only know that it would be hard on them

all at home, and hard on that poor child in Germany, if any ill befalls Charley. And so it is settled that you go, too?"

"Yes, settled."

"Hum! I hope enough people are going in search of Maurice Darcy."

"I am going to take care of Gaston," said Valerie, flushing. "Then, if—if Maurice meets us, papa and I will return to Louisiana."

Miss Fane sat down in a chair, and looked, sadly enough, out of the window.

"Well," she said, after a time. "I suppose one must take for granted that some good will come of it, but it is very vexatious. Valerie I have only one word of advice to offer. May I do so?"

"Say what you please, sister of my soul," Valerie answered.

"Then, if you meet Maurice Darcy, be wise, and don't—don't be too hard."

"Netta!" cried Valerie, turning first crimson, and then pale, "what do you take me for, that—that you should say such a thing? Do you think I would go in search of him, if such an event as that at which you hint was, in the least, possible?. It is a good thing that duty bids me do this, or such grievous injustice would make me stay where I am."

"Now you look like yourself," said Miss Fane, approvingly. "It is really a pleasure to see you angry once more."

"I am not angry. I am only indignant and grieved."

"Because I wish you to be kind and forgiving toward a man who may be dead."

"Netta!—how can you?"

"None of us are immortal, Valerie," said her friend, gravely. "I have noticed lately that these letters have made you buoy yourself with hope that may prove false, and render the final truth harder to bear."

"Netta, you are cruel."

"No, Valerie. But, I do not think there is any probability—only a faint possibility—that he may be alive. And I want to ask you, how you can cherish resentment against a mere memory?"

"I—resentment? Oh, God forbid!"

"You forgive him, then?"

"I have nothing to forgive. Forgiveness would need to come from him."

"And why could you not say as much to him if he were living?"

"Because it would be worse than useless. It would humiliate me as a woman should never be humiliated; and it would not move him. I can see how he would look—as he looked at Charley. You don't know him—he is as hard to himself as he is to others."

"I am not sure that I care about knowing him, under those circumstances," said Miss Fane, rising. "When do you start?"

"Next week, I expect. At least as soon as we can get ready."

This proved to be very soon. Five days later, they sailed from Marseilles—westward bound for the Queen of the Antilles.

CHAPTER III.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

"MAURICE! Maurice!"

Such was the sick man's yearning cry from morning till night—ever tossing in restless delirium—ever calling on that name, which was now, in all probability, only a name.

Many times had Valerie cause to thank God that she had persevered in her resolution to accompany Gaston Darcy to America; for, scarcely did his foot press the soil of the New World, when he was stricken down by a sudden illness—arising, the physicians said, from mingled physical exhaustion and mental anxiety—which, but for her presence, would have cast him helpless on the hands of menials and strangers. As it was, the care he received could not possibly have been more tender, or more unremitting, if his own sister had rendered it. Day and night, she scarcely left his side; and day and night she was tortured by that moan which seemed an echo of her own sad heart—that voice, plaintive and pitiful as Rachel mourning for her children:

"Maurice! Maurice!"

Only that—through long hours of fever, never changing in word or cadence.

It was a fierce fight with the death-angel over that prostrate form, for many days. Through the scorching heat of the tropic noon, and the glorious beauty of the tropic nights, Valerie never stirred from beside the pillow on which that lined and wasted face lay, or suffered any other hand than hers to press to the burning lips their cooling draught. "It is only what I came to do," she said, when her father remonstrated, saying that such close attendance in a sick-room was impairing her own health. "After he is gone, it will not matter." And often, as she kept lonely vigil in the dim chamber—telling over her beads, like a Sister of Mercy, during the long hours—while that constant cry came from the parched lips of the man whom she thought, even then, in Azrael's arms, she would bow her head yet lower in awesome prayer; for it seemed as if the brother's spirit beckoned from the silent land to the yearning love which made this ceaseless moan, and spoke a summons from the shores where hands, once clasped, unclasp no more at the bidding of grief and pain.

No one dreamed that he would recover, that a constitution so shattered could endure so great a shock; but at last the crisis came, and resulted favorably. Then he once more opened his eyes to the daylight, and knew the faces around him. He did not ask the length or severity of his own illness; he only held out his hand to Valerie with one question:

"Any news of Maurice?"

And she could only utter in gesture that negative so hard to speak, so harder yet to feel.

"Who is this 'Maurice' for whom he inquires so constantly?" asked the physician, somewhat impatiently, of General Aylmer, when the latter followed him from the sick-room. "He has done nothing but call him ever since his first hour of fever."

"He is his brother," the general replied, with brevity more commendable than gratifying.

"His brother? Then why does he not come to him, and relieve his mind?"

"Unfortunately, nobody knows where he is."

"Ah"

"He was one of Maximilian's officers," said the general, feeling obliged to answer that little interrogative interjection, "and has never been heard of since the fall of Queretaro."

"Indeed! Shot, no doubt."

"No doubt."

"A good many officers were," said the doctor, philosophically. "And does his brother still hope to hear from him?"

"He came to Cuba for this purpose."

"Poor fellow! Well, well, let him hope, for the time being. A strain on the mind is bad; but despair might be worse. You must take him, as soon as possible, to a less enervating climate. Good-morning."

A few days later, one of the gallant Foreign Legion, who stood so nobly by their royal chief to the very last—the same Valdor concerning whom Maurice had once written to Gaston—joined General Aylmer, as he was slowly sauntering along the Plaza d'Armas, in the brilliant glow of the tropic sunset.

"No news of poor Darcy yet!" he said. "I am really afraid we must surrender all hope. How is his brother to-day?"

"Better," answered the general. "The fever has left him, and he has his head back again—but he is very weak."

"Yes, of course—people always are. Is he well enough to see visitors? I was refused admittance very summarily the other day."

"Oh, I suppose so. That is—" as a timely recollection of Valerie occurred to him—"I will inquire. But perhaps it would be as well if you did not come. He might think you brought news of his brother."

"*Ma foi*, I wish I did!" said the other, heartily. "A better soldier—well, well, it is only the chances of war, and may be mine to-morrow. I hear that Yañes has been made prisoner and shot," he went on. "That looks badly for him—Darcy, I mean."

"Who is Yañes?"

"Yañes! *Vraiment!* I wonder you never heard. He was the boldest, bloodiest guerrilla-chief in all Mexico—the one to whom Darcy was sent."

"And he has been shot?"

"Yes—together with most of his command. Poor fellow! He was a perfect devil for fighting, and was said to have put an end to more than a hundred Liberal dogs with his own *cuchillo*."

The general shrugged his shoulders, with a laugh. "He is a great loss, then," he said. "Such a man as that is a loss at any time—especially in Mexico. And you think this looks badly for Captain Darcy?"

"Of course. If he was taken with Yaffes, there was an end of the matter."

The general was silent, and looked so disturbed, that, from respectful sympathy, his companion was silent also. Yet, in truth, he was thinking less of Darcy than of Hautaine, concerning whom, or from whom, they had heard nothing. "I hope he will not be fool enough to risk *his* head," the general thought, feeling more irritated than ever against Maurice Darcy—if, indeed, any increase of irritation were possible. As much as he liked anybody not immediately connected with himself, he liked Hautaine; and it provoked him beyond the bounds of patience to think that the young free lance had rushed headlong into such danger as that which certainly threatened him—and for what?

When he came back from his walk, he told Valerie that he had met young Valdor, and that the latter wished to see Mr. Darcy.

"It is impossible," she said. "He would only come and talk of Maurice, and of all the chances for and against his safety, until Gaston's fever would be brought back. He is too weak to see anybody. Pray tell Captain Valdor so, the next time you see him."

"But the doctor said he might see a few visitors."

"I cannot help that. I think I know his state better even than the doctor does. At all events, I cannot consent that any risk should be run."

"The doctor says he must be taken away from this climate as soon as possible."

"He will never consent to leave the island until there is some certain information about Maurice."

The general was on the point of saying, "Confound Maurice!" but he stopped himself in time. "He need not leave the island," he answered. "He can go to the hill-country."

"You can speak to him about it yourself, papa. But I doubt if he will consent even to that."

"He had better, or he will not have an option long of consenting to any thing."

"Does the doctor think that removal is absolutely necessary?"

"He said so."

Valerie sat twisting and untwisting, with absent fingers, the watch-chain that hung at her girdle, while her eyes gazed past her father, full of painful thought—gazed out of the window, through which came the soft murmur of a fountain playing in the court below.

"I know how Gaston will feel," she said at length; "because I share the feeling myself—a sort of instinct that we ought not to leave here."

"Why not?"

The general spoke sharply, because he was irritated.

"I don't know that there is a 'why,' papa. It is, as I said, only an instinct which I feel. But I know that he feels it, too—an instinct that we shall receive news of Maurice, or at least of Charley, if we only wait long enough."

"I hope that you will not put such ideas into his head."

"You may trust me not to do that. But I think you will find them there, all the same. Besides, you forget that we promised Charley he should find us here."

The general was so vexed and uncomfortable, that this last remark quite upset him, and he could not forbear endeavoring to make Valerie share, if not his vexation, at least his discomfort.

"I don't know that you need consider Hautaine," he said, significantly. "From what I hear to-day, it seems very probable that he has found the fate he might have expected."

"Papa!"—it was a long gasp, and the pale face looked at him full of quivering apprehension—"papa!—what have you heard?"

"Not much—nothing directly about him," answered the general, sorry now that

he had spoken. "Only you remember he said he knew some of those guerrilla-chiefs, and that he was going to them—well, one of the most noted has been captured and shot."

"Do you remember the name?"

"Yañes, I believe."

Valerie shook her head. "I don't think that was one of the names Charley mentioned," she said. "But it may have been—I do not know. O, papa, papa, why did you tell me any thing so horrible?"

"I don't know, I am sure," said the general, hastily. "But don't alarm yourself foolishly, Valerie. I certainly did not mean you to do that. This man's death may have no connection with Hautaine."

"But Maurice!—has it any connection with him?"

"Hem!—well I do not know," said the general, who thought he had done mischief enough for once. "We will hope not. Now, can I see Mr. Darcy?"

"O, papa, for Heaven's sake, don't mention this to him."

"Do you think I am crazy?" asked the general, sharply. "Of course I have not an idea of doing so. I would like to speak to him about going to the hill-country, though. Can I see him?"

"I will go and find out."

She glided away, with the noiseless tread of a born *sœur de bons secours*, and entered the sick man's room. The shaded lamp burned so low that she could only see the outline of his figure, and this was so motionless that she thought he was asleep. Pausing a moment, however, to bend over the table and discover if Watkins had administered the usual night-draught, his voice called her name.

"I thought you were asleep," she said, approaching the bed. "Indeed, I think it would be better if you were."

"Why?"

"Papa wants to see you, and, if I tell him to come in, he will talk so much that there will be no sleep for you to-night."

"Has he any thing to tell me?"

"No: he only wants to inquire how you are."

"Oh!" he gave a little weary sigh—the weariness of hope long deferred. "Let him come in."

"Will you promise not to talk much?"

"Yes—indeed, I am not likely to be tempted. After the general has asked me how I feel, hoped I will soon be better, and said that the weather is very warm, our topics of conversation are nearly exhausted."

"He has another one to-night," Valerie thought, but she did not say so. She contented herself with another caution, and then went to summon her father. "Don't talk to him much, papa," she said; and the general promised he would not. Not that this promise stood for much—he made it every time he paid a visit, and generally forgot it two minutes after—but Valerie always exacted it, as a sort of precautionary measure that would keep her own conscience clear, if it did no other good.

Left alone in the sitting-room, she went to the window, and, resting her arms on the sill, looked mournfully forth at the glorious tropic night, at the heavens, brilliant with a radiance unknown to colder latitudes, and at the Southern Cross—that constellation of her unhappy country—which was burning just above her head. They were near the harbor; and now that there was a breeze from the northward, she could hear the waves breaking with sullen, regular sound against the parapet. Ah, it *was* weary work—this waiting—this hoping—this expectation—this continual disappointment! Sometimes—to-night, for instance—she felt how vain it was; she felt certain that he would never come back again; that there would never be another meeting until it was given to the disembodied spirits. And it was hard—very hard, she thought—that his last recollection of her should have been angry, passionate, and defiant!—her last picture of him cold, stern, and forbidding! Oh, had they but been a little wiser—on either side, a little more patient—how different it all would have been! Alas! alas! There would be no bitterness in retrospection, if there were not always such thoughts as these; if from the past there did not rise up those mournful shades of harsh words and wronging thoughts, of unkind looks and more unkind deeds, which, large or small

come back to us—when it is too late for atone ment—and when we can only cry, from the depths of our remorse, "Oh for one hour in which to win forgiveness!" And then, Charley!—she must needs be wretched on his account, too—wretched in the thought that his bright young life was possibly sacrificed in the vain effort to atone; the vain effort to save the man whom he had injured. She tried to pray for him, but the horrible thought that, even then, it might be all over with him, came to her, and the words died on her lips. She could only lay her head down on her arms, and feel as if her heart was breaking from unutterable misery.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SUNLIGHT FROM THE SEA.

"You look so tired," said Valerie, the next day, anxiously watching Gaston's face, as he lay back against his white pillows. "Can I do nothing to entertain you?—nothing to divert your mind for a little while?"

"Thank you," he answered, with a faint smile. "But you have done so much already, that you must be very tired yourself."

"No—never tired, if I can only succeed in amusing you. But that has been particularly hard to-day."

"Yes, I am afraid that I am becoming ungrateful as well as troublesome."

"Hush! You must not say—you must not think—such a thing for a minute. The question is, what can I do? I am sure you are tired of hearing reading—especially as our supply of English books is so limited. Shall I sing to you, by way of variety?"

"I—believe not. Music pains me when I am suffering."

"Suffering?" she repeated, quickly. 'How? Does your head ache?"

"No. My heart aches—and that is the worst of the two. Valerie, I have almost given up hope."

She laid her hand gently down upon his.

"Gaston, dear Gaston, perhaps it would be wisest to do so."

He gave a quick bound, and clasped eagerly, almost painfully, the hand lying upon his own.

"You—have you heard any thing?"

"No, no," she said, hastily, frightened at the effect of her words. "Nothing—believe me, nothing. Only, like yourself, I have watched and waited until the last spark of hope has died out."

"I think it is all gone until something like this occurs," he said, faintly, as he sank back exhausted on his pillows. "Then I know that I am hoping yet—longing yet—

> 'For the touch of a vanished hand,
> And the sound of a voice that is still.'

You asked me, a moment ago, what you should do—repeat those lines for me."

She obeyed—much as she doubted the wisdom of the request. Nature had bestowed on her a rarely melodious voice, with a richer, deeper *timbre* than is usual in woman, and her quick perception of the shades of poetic meaning, together with her highly-trained musical ear, combined to produce an elocution better than all the rhetoric of the schools. It was pleasure at any time to hear her read aloud, and still greater pleasure to listen while she repeated some verse that had lingered in her memory, even if that verse was not so perfect in pathos and beauty as the English poet's immortal lines. Ah, how many a mourning heart has echoed that lament—wellnigh the most touching ever spoken by love—and how many a sorrow thrilled as it were into new life by the yearning music of that cry!

There was silence when her voice ceased; silence unbroken even by a sound, although Gaston's wasted fingers covered his face, and Valerie's heart felt as if it must faint away under the burden laid upon it.

It was some little time after this that they were startled by the general's step on the stairs, and the sound of his voice, together with another, which they both recognized at once as Valdor's.

"I told your father he might bring him to-day," Gaston said, in a tone of deprecation, as he saw Valerie's look of surprised annoyance. "Don't blame anybody but me."

"But I do blame papa. He ought not to have mentioned the matter to you. I told him you could not see visitors."

"He did not mention it," said Mr. Darcy, eagerly. "I asked him if he had met Valdor lately, and said I was very anxious to see him."

"Why are you anxious to see him? What good will it do?"

"I want to hear once more all that he thinks about Maurice," he answered, sadly. "I want to know his opinion *now*—he is better able to judge than we are. And, if I am to be taken away, I want him to promise that he will let me know—any thing he may hear."

Valerie sighed. But it was too late for expostulation. Her father was already requesting admittance at the door, and, a few moments later, Gaston was warmly clasping the hand of the young officer who had been Maurice's sworn comrade and friend.

"Come, my dear," said General Aylmer to his daughter, "I insist upon your taking a little exercise while Captain Valdor is here. He will entertain Mr. Darcy."

"Pray, mademoiselle, go," said the young man. "You are looking pale—and I assure you Mr. Darcy shall not be dull while you are gone."

Gaston seconded the request; and, although she did so with much reluctance, Valerie was forced to submit. Yet, as she tied on her bonnet, and looked in the mirror at her pale face and sunken eyes, she began to think herself that a little fresh air might not be amiss. So she negatived her father's proposal of a *volante*, and, saying that she preferred to walk, took his arm as they turned away from the *porte cochère*.

"Let us go down to the Cortina," she said. "I have heard the waves all day, and I want to see them."

Down to the Cortina they went accordingly. Something of a gale had been blowing all day, and the sea was dashing in high, angry waves against the stone battlements of the Punta and the Moro—a sight well worth witnessing. It had been cloudy ever since daylight—was still cloudy on land—but afar out on the sea, beyond the harbor, lay a glory of sunlight gilding the foam-crested waves, as they rolled in with a sound like distant thunder, and shining on the white sails and tall masts of a ship just shaping her course between the two frowning forts.

"Look!" said Valerie, watching it with half-sad eyes of interest. "It seems bringing the sunlight to the shore."

And truly it did. For even as the ship advanced, the broad line of light advanced with it, and that much of gloomy shadow retreated sullenly back to settle yet more grayly over the dominion left it. Forward came the ship—forward the golden flood that was giving a thousand glittering sparkles to the dashing surf and spray. With sails outspread, like an angel's great white wings, the vessel bore down between the lofty battlements that guard the entrance of the harbor—and the flashing glory fell over the stern fortresses, and gleamed upon the royal banner of Spain. Nearer yet the ship—and sunlight crowned all the rolling amphitheatre of hills, and all the coronals of waving palms. Nearer, yet nearer—and sunlight flung its broad mantle of gold over city, plains, and sea.

"It has brought it to us a little too brightly," said the general. "You had better lower your veil, Valerie."

But this Valerie did not care to do. She was interested in watching the animated scene that ensued upon the ship's coming to her anchorage, the bustle upon her deck, the boats darting over the blue water to her side.

"She is from Vera Cruz," she heard a voice near her say. "Let us go aboard, and hear the last news of whom Juarez has been shooting."

From Vera Cruz! Ah, foolish heart, be still! Every week comes some white-winged messenger from the land where anarchy and murder reign; but it has never yet borne the freight that would make its coming aught to you.

But, to do Valerie justice, her rushing eagerness did not anticipate his own coming. She only thought, she only hoped, for letters or for tidings. *Any* tidings would be better than the suspense they had been enduring. We all say such things as this. We all say, "Any certainty is better than

suspense." But when certainty awful and undoubted, comes, we shrink back, crying vainly for the mercy of that suspense which, at least, knew hope.

General Aylmer was standing by his daughter, meditatively watching a boat which had just received two passengers of the ship, and thinking to himself how very uncomfortable they must have found the shipboard accommodations (supposing them to know any thing about any better), and how very much he would have disliked a voyage under such circumstances, when his arm was grasped with a force which pained even its firm muscles.

"The devil!" he cried, turning abruptly. "Why, Valerie, is it you? By Jove, your fingers have some strength in them! What is the matter?"

"Papa," said Valerie, with a strange gasp in her voice—not heeding him at all, but keeping her eyes fastened in a strained gaze on the very boat her father himself had been watching. "Papa—look! I am afraid to trust my own eyes! Who—who is that yonder?"

"Where?" asked the general, staring in the faces of all the people about him. "I don't see anybody I know. Where do you mean?"

"Yonder—in the boat! The boat that has left the ship. Papa, papa, who is it?"

The general looked, but he could make out nothing. He was rather near-sighted, however, so he mounted his eye-glass; then he saw two military-looking men, one of whom was sitting down, and the other standing up watching the shore. His glance happened to fall first on the latter, and he exclaimed joyfully:

"It is Charley!"

But Valerie's voice, all shaken with emotion, made him start, as she said:

"It is Maurice!"

Then looking at the other, and the boat coming nearer with every moment, he saw that she was right. He, too, recognized the man from whom he had parted in Baltimore, two years before—the soldier of fortune whom they had almost given over as dead. He, too, knew at a glance Maurice Darcy.

"Papa," said Valerie, in a quick, eager tone (her veil was down now), "this must not come upon Gaston suddenly—not, at any rate, without some preparation. You stay here and meet them as soon as they land, while I go and tell the news to him."

Before the general could utter a word, acquiescent or otherwise, she had left his side and was speeding away.

She found Valdor gone, when she entered his room, and only Watkins mounting guard over his master.

"I made him go," said Gaston, in a tone of apology. "He wanted to stay; but some one called for him, and I made him go."

"I am glad he is gone," said Valerie, sinking into a chair, quite breathless; and something in the tone and manner attracted the invalid's attention.

"You seem to have been in haste," he said, looking at her curiously.

"Yes—I was."

"Did you come back alone?"

"Quite alone."

"Why, where is the general?"

"He stayed behind, to see—a friend."

"A friend?"

Gaston was growing suspicious. He raised himself on his elbow, and the color came and went on his pale cheek at a rate that alarmed Valerie. She remembered suddenly the physician's warning against any shock or excitement, and she feared that she had not kept herself under sufficient control. She rose and went to the bedside—outwardly calm once more, though every pulse was throbbing tumultuously—and stood looking down on him with eyes that glowed with something of their old, lustrous light.

"Gaston," she said, and she strove in vain, to quite steady her voice—"let us thank God for His great mercy—I have heard news of Maurice!"

For the first time since he laid his head down, three long weeks before, the sick man sprung to an upright, sitting position.

"Of Maurice! Oh, thank God—thank God! You are quite sure, Valerie?"

"Quite sure"—she had flung herself on her knees beside the bed. "He is living—

he is safe! Oh, what have we ever done to deserve such a great blessing?"

"What have I ever done?" said Gaston, faintly. Then he closed his eyes and sunk back upon the pillow.

With a frightened cry, Valerie sprung to the table, and seized a bottle of ammonia which stood there. But the swoon—if swoon it really was—only lasted a minute. He gave a gasp as he inhaled the strong aromatic spirits which she held to his nostrils, and then the long lashes lifted again.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered. "It was only a sudden spasm of the heart—from joy, you know. But joy never kills. I am better now. Ah, I shall soon be well, if Maurice is coming! Did you say he is coming?"

"I hope so—I believe so. But you must not talk just now. I will tell you all about it after a while."

"And Charley?"

"Charley is safe, too."

He lay silent for a moment—then looked up again with an imploring glance.

"Did he tell you he had *seen* Maurice?"

"Did who tell me?"

"The man you saw. Surely you said you had seen somebody who knew."

"I—yes, I saw somebody."

"Who was it?"

Valerie hesitated. She did not know whether to tell him or not. While she hesitated—wishing, and yet fearing to do so—part of the truth at least flashed upon Gaston. He threw his arms up, with a cry:

"Charley! It is Charley who has come! Oh, where is he?—where is he?"

"Gaston," she cried, authoritatively, "this will never do! I did not say it was Charley! You must compose yourself, or you will be ill again. Oh, if only the doctor was here!"

"No," he answered, "you did not say it was he, but I know it must have been. And he would never have come without Maurice, if Maurice was living. Valerie—" he raised himself up again, and caught the hand nearest him—"Valerie, has Maurice come?"

"Gaston!"

"Ah, I knew it—I knew it! Thank God! And—stop! There is Hautaine now!"

It was, indeed. As he spoke, a step came bounding up the stairs, the door was burst open without ceremony, and Hautaine's handsome, bronzed face appeared, as Hautaine's self rushed in upon them. Of what ensued Valerie had only a dim conception. All of a sudden, she grew weak and faint, and a black mist came over her sight. Unconsciously, she sank into a chair behind the sweeping curtains of the bed, and she heard Hautaine's voice as in a dream, when he poured forth his eager story, telling Gaston how he had found Maurice condemned to death with Yañes, the guerrilla-chief, and on the very verge of execution; how it was only through those friends in power of whom he had once spoken, by their influence, and especially by their bribery, that he obtained his release in the official form of banishment; and how— But here it was that Gaston cut him short with a joyful cry, that rang through the room like music:

"He is coming! Maurice is coming! I hear his step!"

The next moment, a tall form darkened the door-way—a quick step crossed the floor—Gaston sprang forward—and the brothers were in each other's arms.

For a full minute there was silence. Hautaine drew back, and went toward General Aylmer, who had paused in the door. They passed away together, but Valerie was fast prisoned in her retreat; and, even if she had not been so prisoned, she was powerless to move—powerless even to speak.

Maurice's voice was the first to break upon the stillness—the quiver of something that was almost a sob in every tone.

"Gaston, Gaston, can I ever forgive myself? Brother the best!—friend the dearest!—to think that I should, in my selfishness, have gone away and left you to suffer like this, alone!"

"Brother, no—not alone," Gaston answered. "There has been one who has taken even your place!—one who has soothed my pain, and nursed my sickness, like an angel sent from Heaven!—one, but for whom I should never have lived to look upon your face again!"

"Gaston! My God!—you cut me to the

heart! A stranger to do this; and I—I, who ought never to have left you—far away!"

"A stranger, Maurice! No—there is but one person alive who would have tended me thus, or been to me what she has—more than friend and sister. Brother, she is there! Have you no word of thanks for her?"

He turned; and almost, as it were, against her will, Valerie rose from her seat, and stood before him—her face shining upon him fair and pale as a star. Maurice recoiled a step in astonishment; for, though he knew that she was there, he had not expected to see her so soon. Then they stood and looked into each other's eyes. Both were sadly changed—upon the faces of each sorrow and care had laid stern signet—but what of that? They looked into each other's eyes, and they read there the love and faith that had never faltered with either, and were forever beyond the things of Earth and Time. Maurice opened his arms with one cry:

"Valerie!"

After that, there was never any need of explanation.

THE END.

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